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Covers and text printed in the UK by William Gibbons
Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London EC1A 9PT. Tel: 020 7429 4000

Wallpaper: Supplied from wallpaper direct (www.wallpaperdirect.co.uk) & John Lewis (www.johnlewis.com)

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Calibrate your TV for perfect viewing, p28

WELCOME



You'll notice a few new features in this issue of *Home Cinema Choice*, as we've responded to your feedback from our recent Reader Survey by giving you more of what you want in every area!

For a start, **there's more to read about custom home cinema installations, plus the first part of a fantastic DIY feature on page 16.** Then there's AV Clinic, the place to go for expert solutions to your home cinema problems, on page 32. Meanwhile, on page 92 we kick off a column about the future of downloading movies from the internet, and starting on page 103 there's an enhanced Buyers' Guide that brings more data than ever before on the best kit you could possibly buy.

All this, plus our usual roster of reviews, including Panasonic's 65-incher on page 70, a fabulous Sim2 projector on page 56, and on page 52 we go wild for PSB's speaker system. Stick with us until next time, when we hit our record-breaking 200th issue!

Chris Jenkins
Editor

TEAM HCC



Chris Jenkins: Industry veteran Chris remembers when movies came on stone tablets



Mark Craven: *HCC*'s Deputy Editor is as passionate about AV gear as he is about Jason Statham



Anton van Beek: Anton's love of cinema makes him the fount of all movie knowledge



James Waldron: Taking on our tech testing calls on James' in-depth aud[illegible]ngineering skills



Jill Lubetkin: Jill's magazine skills mean that even the techiest articles make perfect sense



John Rook: Art Editor John was here when amps were all silver the first time around

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D.I.Y. HOME CINEMA

Creating your own cinema p16



Thinking of building your own cinema room? We uncover all of the skills, knowledge and equipment you'll need with this DIY home cinema project

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Our guarantee to you:
Equipment reviewed in *Home Cinema Choice* is measured and quantified by Future Tech Labs, which for more than 15 years has set the standard for independent AV test & measurement. The findings of the Tech Labs are used to underpin the subjective opinions of our Reviews team, ensuring that you receive the best possible advice when it comes to planning your next purchase

CO-STARRING

This issue's team of expert writers are the best qualified in the business

Danny Phillips: Former editor of *What Video & High-Definition TV* and dedicated AV boffin



Richard Stevenson: Industry veteran and former Editor of UK CE trade journal *ERT*

Steve May: *HCC*'s former Editor-in-Chief is one of the UK's most respected AV journos

John Archer: The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early *HCC* staffer



Martin Pipe: Technology specialist Martin co-developed *HCC*'s Tech Lab operation

Adrian Justins: Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*

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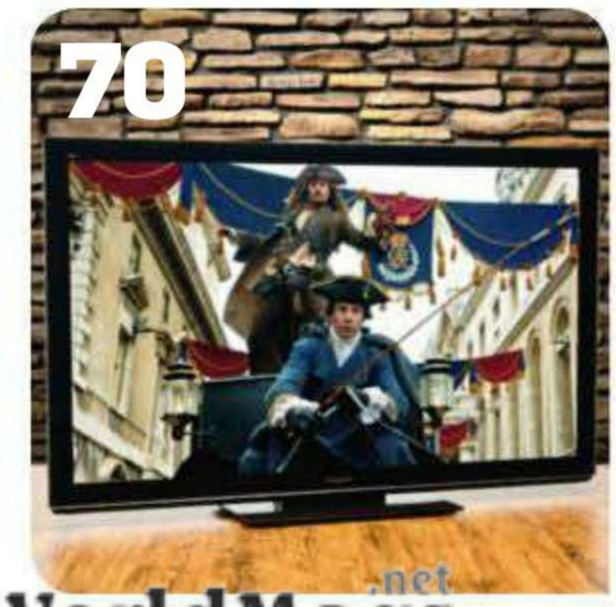












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Trusted Reviews RECOMMENDED

TX-P50VT30B, Recommended (9 out of 10), Trusted Reviews, April 2011

T3

TX-P50VT30B, 5 Stars, T3, April 2011

WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION

TX-P50VT30B, 5 Stars, What Hi-Fi?, July 2011

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BULLETIN

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Pack-in-a-box

Denon DHT-1312XP → www.denon.co.uk



Those looking for a one-box home cinema solution to work in conjunction with their new 3DTV and Blu-ray player combo should check out this affordable package from Denon, which combines the company's entry-level AVR-1312 AV receiver with the piano black 5.1-channel SYS-1312 loudspeaker system – all for just £400. The AVR features four HDMI v1.4 inputs and one output, allowing multiple sources to be connected, and claims 5 x 110W amplification. Built-in Compressed Audio Restorer tech is on hand to buff up your digital music files.

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Real gems

Wharfedale Jade Series → www.wharfedale.co.uk

Wharfedale's Jade Series consists of four stereo speakers (the standmount Jade-1 and Jade-3, plus the floorstanding Jade-5 and Jade-7), a pair of dedicated centre speakers (Jade-C1 and Jade-C2) and a wall-mountable surround speaker (Jade-SR). In addition to promising the brand's usually high standard of performance and build quality, the Jade range uses a proprietary advanced cone material, dubbed Acufiber, that 'marries the responsiveness of glass and carbon fibre with a self-damping woven matrix' to improve responsiveness. Prices start at around £600 for a pair of Jade-1s (in either black oak or vintage cherry), going up to £2,700 for a pair of Jade-7s in the more expensive piano black finish.

Partner with...

NAD T 748

3D-capable AVR → £795 Approx



In addition to its stereoscopic compatibility, NAD's latest AVR promises audiophile sound performance thanks to seven channels of ultra-low distortion power, proprietary EARS (Enhanced Ambience Retrieval System) pseudo-surround tech, a preamp output for those who demand even more power, plus ARC (Audio Return Channel) via HDMI for maximum flexibility and simple system integration.
www.nadelectronics.com

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BASH street kids



US loudspeaker specialist Klipsch will rattle some rafters with its latest trio of subwoofers. The lineup kicks off with the bass-reflex SW-208 active sub (pictured), which costs around £800 and features a 300W BASH Digital Hybrid amplifier, 8in woven fibreglass driver and a pair of 8in dual passive radiators. The front-ported £600 SW-112 features the same 300W BASH amp, but opts for a single 12in bass driver. The baby of the range is the £500 SW-110, with a 200W version of the BASH amp and a single 10in driver.
www.klipsch.co.uk

Sleeker viewing



ViewSonic is reinvigorating its PJD5 series of projectors with a second generation of models that benefit from a sleeker design. While these upgrades are primarily aimed at class- and boardroom environments, they also make several of the models particularly appealing for discrete use in a living room. The most interesting from a home cinema perspective is the £600 WXGA (1280x800) resolution PJD5523w, which claims 2700 lumens of brightness and is compatible with the manufacturer's VP3D1 3D video processor.
www.viewsoniceurope.com

Vocal boost



Danish speaker brand Cornered Audio has an innovative twist that is spelled out in the company name. Its speakers feature a unique 90° triangular cabinet design that makes them ideal for mounting in room corners or below the ceiling – them an enticing proposition for rear/surround duties in a living room environment. Priced around £600 per pair and distributed in the UK by Karma-AV, the speakers feature a 1in silk tweeter dome and twin Peerless 5.25in woofers (one driven, one passive).
www.karma-av.co.uk

Lin enjoys franchise freedom

Fast & Furious director says he won't sell out to 3D gimmickry

Unlike many of his Hollywood contemporaries, filmmaker Justin Lin is not a big proponent of 3D. While his name might be unfamiliar to some, the past five years have seen the Taiwan-born Lin become one of the industry's hottest directors due to his work on the three most recent entries in the *Fast & Furious* franchise.

The franchise has remained resolutely 2D to date – a fact Lin takes full credit for. 'We talked about doing 3D on the *Fast* movies and I fought very hard not to do that,' he told *HCC*. 'I just don't think that when 3D came up it was anything more than a business decision, not an aesthetic decision. And I had to fight that, because ultimately I think that ripping off the fans and making them pay money just so they can see 3D is a disgrace.'

Gross out!

HCC caught up with Lin to talk about the Blu-ray release of *Fast Five*, which arrives in the UK on September 5, following a blockbuster cinema run that saw it become the highest grossing entry in the franchise in just 15 days. Naturally, we were keen to find out just what it was about this particular franchise that keeps luring Lin back, especially now that his name is being linked to the likes of another *Terminator* sequel and a *Highlander* reboot.

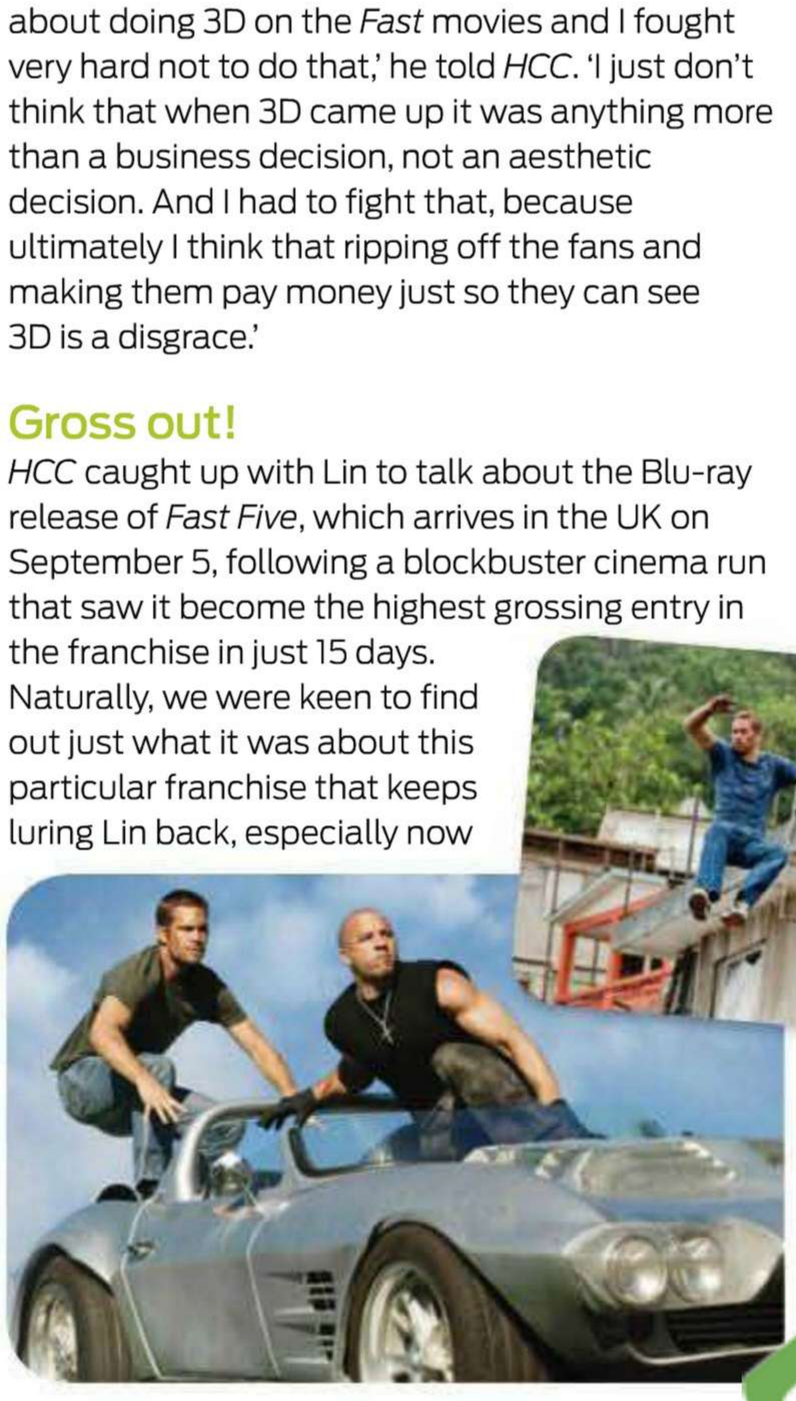


'Blu-ray means everything to me as a filmmaker' says Fast Five helmer Justin Lin

'The thing that I enjoy, he explained, 'is that I have a very good partnership with the studio... Universal really allowed me to re-establish the sensibilities of the franchise and to respect the growth and maturity of the series and how it's evolved. If you look at all five films in the franchise, they've all been pretty different. To be able to be part of a franchise, but not constrained by any boundaries, has been the most fun.'

While not the biggest 3D fan around, Lin has no problems championing Blu-ray. 'It means everything for me as a filmmaker, because I know that's where a film is going to go and live most of its life,' states the director. 'The window for a film at the theatre is finite. But once you go to Blu-ray, it's there forever. So when I do the colour timing for the cinema release, that's great. But I spend extra time going through it again on Blu-ray, to make sure. And I think that all of the extras, all the bonus materials are important, because it's an archival element now.'

That said, his love of home cinema has also caused Lin the odd problem, including one many *HCC* readers will be familiar with: 'I have a very decent home cinema setup. My system was probably a little oversized for the apartment that I had a few years back. I enjoyed it, although I don't think my neighbours did.'



Record breaker: *Fast Five* is the highest grossing movie in the franchise

Playlist...

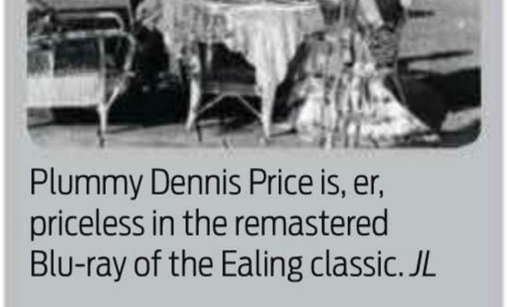
Team *HCC* reveals its Playback picks of the last month

Erotibot (R2 DVD)



Quite the best pervy, Japanese robot, martial arts, sex comedy I've seen this month. *CJ*

Jonah Hex (All-region BD)



Not as bad as I'd expected. There's a good movie inside it trying to get out. *MC*

Kind Hearts and Coronets (Region B BD)



Plummy Dennis Price is, er, priceless in the remastered Blu-ray of the Ealing classic. *JL*

The Hour (BBC HD)



The BBC's answer to *Mad Men*, complete with the sexism and excessive smoking. *JW*

In Bruges (All-region BD)



Out on Blu-ray the week before I went to Bruges myself. So I naturally watched it to prepare for my own visit. *AvB*

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Talkback

Team *HCC* discusses the loss of Panasonic's UK R&D operation



Toshiba announced the closure of its Plymouth TV assembly plant, the last of its kind in the UK, in April 2009. The loss of Panasonic's UK R&D division is a harder blow still. We know it's hard to make money on TVs as prices erode, and manufacturing will go wherever it's cheapest, but surely R&D must be at the core of any technology company? It's important that investment and skills of this kind are kept in this country, but what's it going to take to solve the problem? Government intervention? Or are we just going to have to wait for the economic upturn...? **CJ**



This isn't just sad news for those at Panasonic's UK Television Design Centre, but it's a blow to UK consumers. As the division's role in the adoption of Freesat illustrates, having a slice of a company's R&D operating on home turf can be a boon for buyers.

As for AV in general, I'm left wondering how the UK can still lead the way in hi-fi, but doesn't have an established TV manufacturer (although I tip my hat to newcomer, Cello). How hard can it be to meld some glass and circuitry together in a shiny bezel and sell it for a profit? Quite hard, it seems. **MC**

Panasonic to close R&D base

Global restructuring spells the end for the UK TV Design Centre

Panasonic is to close its UK Television Design Centre in Cardiff, making all 138 boffins and support staff redundant. The move is part of a global restructuring programme that will result in the loss of around 13,000 jobs.

Nigel Thomas, executive engineer and one of the chief technologists affected, has been at the sharp end of Panasonic's TV R&D for years. He told *HCC*: 'We were all really shocked to hear the news. To be honest, we never saw it coming.'

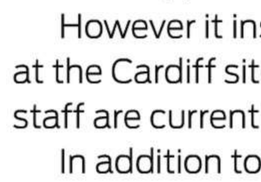
Thomas says that his team were told about the development by management last Friday. 'The plan now is to take all R&D back to Osaka. The announcement has taken us all by surprise. We thought we were all doing a good job...'

Panasonic has issued the following statement regarding the planned closure: 'It is Panasonic's aim for all areas of its business to be profitable and we are looking at options to consolidate our design efforts from Panasonic Manufacturing UK Television Design Centre in Cardiff to Japan.'

Keeping costs down

The company says that the transfer of 'these business functions' will help ensure that its European TV business remains competitive. It says it needs to combine high quality 'with a lower competitive product cost'.

The plasma maker declined to make any other comments as a consultation period for staff is now underway. 'Until this period of consultation has concluded, Panasonic has no further comment to make.'



Nigel Thomas, one of Panasonic UK's chief technologists

The Panasonic Television Design Centre has become a renowned centre for technical excellence for more than 30 years, and has played a key role in the development of the company's UK TV business. Throughout the Eighties and Nineties, it ushered in a number of award-winning picture processing technologies for the brand's CRT TVs. More recently the division spearheaded the adoption of Freesat into the company's Plasma and LCD ranges.

Panasonic UK confirmed that should the consolidation go ahead, as seems highly likely, it would 'have a significant impact on the 138 employees who work within the PMUK Television Design Centre and potentially some shared service support functions.

However it insists that other business units at the Cardiff site, where some 530 permanent staff are currently employed, will not be affected.

In addition to the threatened Television Design Centre, it's also the base for its Home Appliance Division (which produces microwave ovens), Computer Products Europe (which produces laptops) and Disk Services – a specialist encryption service company.



Farewell: Panasonic is looking to consolidate its TV design efforts in its native Japan

Harmony at home



Logitech's new Harmony 200 is a snip at just £20 and can replace up to three remotes, supporting over 5,000 brands and over 225,000 devices. The easy online setup means that all you need to do is create an account, enter your device and connect your remote to a computer. Logitech then does everything else. 'Three remotes just to watch TV... doesn't have to be,' says general manager Marcus Harvey about the advantage a universal remote can bring to even a standard TV/set-top box/speaker system.
www.logitech.com/harmony

Dinos out on BD



It's the hi-def release that's been 65 million years in the making! Universal Pictures has confirmed that it is bringing the *Jurassic Park Trilogy* to Blu-ray in the UK on October 24. Available in three versions (£50 Blu-ray Trilogy, £60 Limited Collector's Edition and £90 Collector's Gift Set), the discs themselves remain the same across all three releases and promise most of the old DVD extras (including behind-the-scenes featurettes, deleted scenes, production archives), plus the new *Return to Jurassic Park* six-part doc and DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtracks.
www.universalpict...co...

Tara-!-ntino BDs



The US branch of Lionsgate has confirmed it is bringing Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and *Jackie Brown* to Blu-ray on October 4. While both titles have been previously available elsewhere in the world, Lionsgate claims that its discs will feature new 1080p digital re-masters 'supervised by Quentin Tarantino'. Both BDs will also include new *Critics Corner: Then and Now* featurettes, while *Pulp Fiction* also adds retrospective cast interviews to the DVD extras. We expect them to also hit shelves here before the year is out.
www.lionsgate.com

Touched by evil



Eureka Entertainment is partnering with Universal Pictures to release select catalogue titles in Eureka's *The Masters of Cinema Series*. The first fruits of the deal will be arriving this winter, with the DVD release of the 1933 horror classic *The Island of Lost Souls* on October 24. This will be followed on November 14 by what Eureka describes as a 'ridiculously deluxe' double-disc Blu-ray edition of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* and a new Blu-ray special edition of Douglas Trumbull's cult sci-fi classic *Silent Running*.
www.eurekavideo.co.uk

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Myth world

Thor → Paramount Home Entertainment → All-region Blu-ray/R2 DVD

The God of Thunder will be crossing the rainbow bridge to Midgard this Autumn as the latest Marvel Studios superhero blockbuster debuts on Blu-ray and DVD. Flying into action in the UK on September 26, Thor's Blu-ray incarnation comes in two different flavours – a Triple Play 2D version and a Super Play 3D edition. Full specifications have yet to be revealed, but Paramount has confirmed that both Blu-ray versions will feature DTS-HD MA 7.1 audio, and there will be more than 80mins of bonus features including a sneak peak at next year's superhero blockbuster *The Avengers*.

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Tech Diary

Our calendar is here to make sure you don't miss out...

→ AUGUST

26: Conan the Barbarian 3D



Hit the cinema today for this new 3D cinematic reboot of Robert E Howard's legendary pulp icon, with *Game of Thrones*' Jason Momoa taking over the title role. wwwlionsgatefilms.co.uk

29: Hanna

A teenage girl trained to be the ultimate soldier kicks all kinds of ass in this top-notch action thriller. On DVD and Blu-ray from today in the UK. www.universalpictures.co.uk

→ SEPTEMBER

2: IFA

Europe's biggest consumer electronics show opens today in Germany's Messe Berlin and runs for six days. www.ifa-berlin.com

5: 13 Assassins



Arthouse specialist Artificial Eye is bringing Takashi Miike's epic gore-strewn samurai film to DVD and Blu-ray in the UK today. www.artificial-eye.com

7: CEDIA US Expo 2011

The Indianapolis Convention Center opens it doors to this four-day US trade show for the home AV industry. www.cedia.org/expo

9: Troll Hunter



This Norwegian answer to the *The Blair Witch Project* arrives in UK cinema today riding a wave of hype from festival screenings around the globe. www.momentumpictures.co.uk

12: Star Wars: The Complete Saga



The *Star Wars Saga* finally comes to BD. If this isn't the biggest release of the year, we'll eat our old DVD boxset.

22: HCC #200

Your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and full-on software reviews

Hitachi's head is in the Cloud

Touro Mobile Pro drive launch sees return to home entertainment

Hitachi, which effectively pulled out of the home cinema TV market in 2009, is back with a range of external media storage products aimed at the growing 'Cloud computing' market.

While the company continued to manufacture smaller sized televisions, projectors and STBs after leaving the premium priced TV market, it has done little of interest to home cinema enthusiasts since then. The launch of the Touro range marks a renewal of interest in the home entertainment market for the company, which has a well-established reputation for manufacturing reliable internal hard drives for third parties.

The Touro range consists of the Mobile Pro product in 500GB and 750GB sizes, and Desk Pro drives at up to 3TB capacity. Prices start from around £50. Kevin Vine, Hitachi's Senior Director Banded Products for Europe, told *HCC,* 'With the development of networkable TVs and USB devices such as PVRs, this product gives people an opportunity to extend external storage away from just data.'

The Touro products use the USB 3.0 interface (for which a cable is provided), so operation is fast – at 7,500rpm, the internal 2.5in drive is speedy, too. It comes pre-formatted in NTFS, which is recommended for large files such as BD rips.



Kevin Vine: Hitachi's new Touro range is aimed at the 'prosumer'





Mobile Pro: formatted for large rips in NTFS

Get backup

But Hitachi's main marketing emphasis is on the Touro's dual backup functions. Not only does the proprietary backup software enable you to copy important files from your PC or Mac to the Touro, you can also copy them simultaneously to the Cloud. Owners get 3GB of password-protected storage space for free, and can pay a subscription to access space up to 250GB, as well as getting iPhone and iPad control apps. Backups of selected folders can be done manually or set to operate automatically.

'We're aiming at the 'prosumer,' who can see the benefits of secure Cloud storage and remote access,' explained Vine. 'The Touro user front end is easy to operate, and there are no limits on the file formats the system can handle; so far as DVD or Blu-ray file storage is concerned, if you can work out how to rip it, the Touro can store it. At the end of the day it's a data depository for whatever media you want to handle.'

ElectroMotion



Martin Logan's electrostatic speaker, the ElectroMotion ESL, is now on sale in the UK. Priced around £2,500 or £2,900 per pair (for the satin- or gloss-black finishes), the EM-ESL combines a 34in tall curvilinear XStat electrostatic transducer with an integrated 8in woofer, which the company claims is 'equally adept with stereo music and multichannel movies'. The EM series also includes matching centre and surround speakers that make use of thin film transducer technology known as Folded Motio
www.absolutesoun

Panny's plasmas



Panasonic has launched its 30 Series plasma display range. Replacing the 20 Series, the lineup brings the first 60in screen to the company's professional display line, arriving alongside 42-, 50- and 65in models. Intriguingly, the range will be available in two variants – PH30 and PF30 screens. The former are 3D-ready with 5,000,000:1 contrast ratio and are available in all four sizes, while the latter have been designed to reduce power usage and are only available in the two smaller screen sizes. Prices start at around £650 for the TH-42PH30E.
www.panasonic.co.uk

Barely there



As well as its new subs (p9), this month also finds Klipsch unveiling a lineup of minimalist speakers. The Gallery range aims 'to deliver spectacular home cinema audio, but with minimum intrusiveness, and consists of four slim, passive speakers – the G-12, G-16, G-28 (pictured) and G-42 – each name reflecting the speaker's height in inches. All can be either stand- or wall-mounted, while the first three can be configured as a left, centre, right or surround speakers and the G-42 is a LCR soundbar design. Prices start at £180 for a G-12 and go up to £630 for the G-42.
www.klipsch.co.uk

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What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision (July 2011)

WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION ★★★★★

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News x10

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...

1 BT blocks Newzbin2



The Motion Picture Association (MPA) has won a court injunction forcing internet service provider BT to block its customers from accessing Newzbin2, a website that provides easy access to illegal film and music downloads. Unsurprisingly, the MPA is thrilled with the ruling, with president and MD for Europe, Chris Marcich, calling it 'a victory for millions of people working in the UK creative industries.'

2 Cables withdrawn

Makers of HDMI to Mini DisplayPort cables have been told their product is unlicensed and must be withdrawn from sale at once. A spokesperson for HDMI Org has confirmed that the cable (primarily used by Apple in its Mac range, but also used by AV manufacturers) doesn't meet the specifications of a cable that terminates with a male HDMI connector at both ends.

3 Ironclad issue

Warner Home Video has confirmed it is remastering the *Ironclad* DVD and Blu-ray for the UK following the discovery that the 2.35:1 film was presented in a severely compromised 1.78:1 crop on the existing release. The new discs should be available late August/early September and owners of the previous version should contact WBCustomerServices@technicolor.com about getting a replacement.

4 TVs on Apple's roadmap?

A Wall Street analyst recently contacted investors stating that Apple would launch a range of three HDTVs in March 2012. Data from developers suggests they'll feature an integrated surround sound speaker system akin to Bose's VideoWave screen.

5 Whoops 1

Apologies to SMC Systems Integration of London, whose custom home installation we reviewed in *HCC* #198. We credited it to SMC Sound and Vision of Shropshire, an unrelated company. You can find details of the correct SMC at www.smc-uk.com. Must've been a long day...

6 Sony's 3D promos

Sony has launched a '3D Experience' on-demand streaming service for compatible Bravia LCD TVs. The free service offers a range of 3D promotional clips, including highlights of Wimbledon 2011 and film trailers. Sony plans to expand availability to 3D-capable Blu-ray players and Blu-ray home theatre systems in the near future.

7 Video sales hanging on

The British Video Association has revealed that total video sales in the UK were down 5.7 per cent across the first half of 2011, but that this still compares favourably with the record successive falls reported in other markets. On a more positive note, spending on downloads and streaming video increased 18 per cent over the same period.

8 Whoops 2

To clarify the XpanD X103 Universal 3D glasses review in *HCC* #198, they do support the new Panasonic range, as it retained the IR system rather than going for RF. It also supports Sony, JVC and Philips sets and is unlikely to need a firmware upgrade to support future models. The UK distributor is Kalibrate Ltd. You can find their website at www.chromapure.co.uk

9 Game for 3D

LG has launched the first glasses-free 3D mobile phone, the Optimus 3D. Available exclusively from The Carphone Warehouse, the phone has a 4.3in WVGA display supporting 2D images at up to 1080p resolution and 3D at up to 720p. At present 3D material is limited to games and anything you shoot yourself, but 3D films may be available in the future.



10 Loewe's BOGOF

Loewe's 80th anniversary celebrations are kicking off with two retail promotions running until October 31. The first is for a free 22in Connect TV when you buy any 40in screen or larger from the Connect or Individual ranges. The second is for a free Individual Stereospeaker and Table Stand with a limited edition Individual 40 TV with upgraded glass contrast filter panel.

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Premiere

HCC's guide to what's happening in the world of TV and films...

Franchise DNA

Hollywood heavyweight Steven Spielberg made his first ever appearance at the San Diego Comic-Con this year promoting the forthcoming *The Adventures of Tintin*. But his most exciting contribution to the film's panel discussion actually concerned another franchise: 'Hopefully, we will make *Jurassic Park 4* in the next two to three years,' stated the filmmaker, after admitting that a writer was currently already working on the project.

Comic-Con dame...

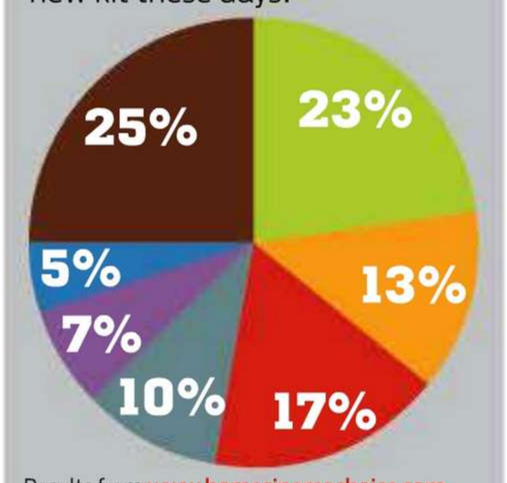


Other good news emerging from Comic-Con included the appearance of Robert Rodriguez, who claimed that Frank Miller 'has written a script for *Sin City 2*' and that 'it could start shooting as early as 'later this year'. Like the original, the film will tell three separate stories, one of which is based on the comic *A Dame to Kill For*, which will also lend its title to the movie.

We asked...

Which of the following AV products are you planning to buy/ upgrade next?

- TV
- Projector
- AV receiver
- Blu-ray player
- Speakers
- PVR (including Sky, Virgin, etc)
- None, I can't afford to buy any new kit these days!



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
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Creating your



HCC reader David Lisk spent £5,000 and lots of spare time transforming his garage into this dedicated movie room. **Chris Jenkins** finds out how

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own cinema



Have you ever thought about building your own home cinema? We don't just mean connecting up a TV, an amp and a set of speakers in your living room, we mean converting a space into a dedicated room for movie enjoyment.

It could be a daunting prospect, but if you have the space, it's the most rewarding way you could spend your time. With a dedicated home cinema installation, you'll be able to enjoy your movies any time, without the interruptions of rustling popcorn, mobile phones or squabbling yoofs. Home cinema heaven could indeed be yours.

But where do you start? What skills, knowledge and equipment do you need for DIY?

Over the next two issues, we'll be following the progress of one *Home Cinema Choice* reader, David Lisk from Northern Ireland, as he finds answers to these questions, and converts a disused garage space into a home cinema system any reader would be proud to own.

The master plan

'Building your own home cinema to professional standards is certainly a daunting task,' admits David. 'But I do have over 30 years experience in construction and education, so I was confident I could handle it. This DIY project included the design, construction and installation of every component, including stud walling, plastering, concealed lighting, a motorised screen housing, final fix joinery, remote lighting systems, audio and projector installation.

'On a moderate budget (a little over £5,000) I carried out all the work myself, using a two-week holiday to work on it full-time and a further three weeks of evenings to complete the project.'

David's design specification required there to be no switches or cables in the room; a motorised screen which could be retracted from view; all audio equipment to be recessed or external to >

David's first job was to build two new ...sulated timber-framed walls...



...then to add an access door. Now the cinema space is divided from the garage, leaving enough space for parking

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With plastering complete, work on the lighting rails and motorised screen housing commences

the room; remotely dimmable lighting and a star effect ceiling, plus provision for disc storage.

Forward planning was vital. 'While work commenced on the stud walling, I ordered various materials and equipment including the lighting, star ceiling kit, screen and various AV components, so they'd be immediately available for installation when required.'

The main purpose of the room, according to David, is simple – 'to watch DVD and Blu-ray movies.' However, he also decided to incorporate Freeview, satellite TV, a PlayStation 3 console, and computer access for games, internet and BBC iPlayer.

'Including a patch panel made it possible to accept legacy equipment such as VHS players, new gadgets such as an iPad, or games consoles brought by friends to play on the big screen. That way, the whole family and friends could enjoy the home cinema experience.'

The three front speakers and the AV equipment are recessed into the walls, along with all the power and speaker cabling. The room is controlled by two remote units, a Harmony 1000 LCD display universal remote for the AV system, and a Home Easy HE-100 touchscreen for the eight (count 'em) lighting systems.

The sound system consists of QAcoustics 1000i Series speakers along with two Bose Acoustimass Dual Cube speakers, in order to create a 7.1-channel system. Amplification and video processing are provided by a Sony STR-DA2400ES multichannel receiver, connected to the main Pioneer BDP-LX70A Blu-ray player. A Pioneer XC-L7 stereo amplifier fed directly from the Blu-ray player's front L/R analogue output can increase the channel count to 9.1 if desired.

At present, the projection system is a Technic HD-198 connected to the BD player, Freeview tuner, Sony PlayStation 3 and Silvercrest satellite receiver. A Dell Optiplex PC is networked to a custom-built server to provide internet access and live video streaming.



The timber-framed plasterboard walls made it easy to add box housings for his AV equipment

Starting the build

'The room, previously a garage, measures 5.5m by 3.6m (18ft x 12ft),' explains David. 'I partitioned off just under half the floor area for the cinema, which leaves enough space to park two small-to-medium vehicles in the remaining garage area. The garage is integral to the house so there is direct access to the theatre. There is a small audio/video suite, which I built a few years ago, adjacent to, and therefore providing entry to, the cinema; this



The early stages with two stud walls constructed, plasterboard installed, and the lighting rail in place



With half the floor area partitioned off and the walls completed, the garage starts to look more like a cinema

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David ran the cable connections for the surround sound system inside the cinema room's walls



Fortunately the garage's timber-framed construction made it relatively easy to undertake the conversion



The cables sprouting from the back of the Sony AVR are labelled to make re-wiring easier

contains the main server and internet connections for the whole house.

'The external walls of the garage were of cavity timber-framed construction, which simplified the work required for the conversion. I was able to add two new insulated, timber-framed walls to form the room and add in a door.

'The main requirement was to thermally insulate the walls and ceiling of the room – this also gives a good degree of sound insulation.'

The two new walls David constructed are timber-framed filled with insulation and finished with plasterboard. This type of wall is inexpensive and straightforward to build, reckons David. 'It also makes it easy to form box housings for the speakers and AV equipment to be recessed into the wall. An important feature is that access to all the rear connections can be gained from the adjacent garage.

All equipment is recessed in the walls or outside the room communicated with by Bluetooth, direct IR or radio-transmitted IR. 'This gives the room a nice uncluttered and hi-tech feel. An added benefit is having very easy access to all connections, to add to or re-patch equipment, should the need arise. By incorporating a retracting screen the room seating can be rearranged – giving the flexibility, if desired, for listening to music, reading or just having a coffee.'

David paid close attention to an often overlooked aspect when building a cinema room – power: 'All the power for it is taken from a separately fused, dedicated consumer unit. Calculations showed that the total power for the room does not exceed 13Amps as most of the equipment and lighting is low wattage. The server in the adjacent studio has an uninterruptible power supply (UPS) and the circuits for the cinema are all fed from surge-protected distribution sockets. The dedicated consumer unit distribution board has 30mA residual current circuit breakers with overload protection as an extra safety precaution.'

Starry, starry night...

The intelligent lighting system is another key part of the finished room and David had strict ideas on what needed to be accomplished. 'With eight lighting circuits and the need for dimming circuits on four of these [illegible]me clear the lighting

would need to be remotely controlled, otherwise a lot of wall switches would be required. A cost-effective solution was found in the HomeEasy HE 100 touchscreen remote, allowing control of all lighting while seated. This can store a number of pre-programmed mood settings

'The lighting circuits include: concealed ceiling lighting from a dimmable LED rope light built into the lighting rail; blue LED uplighting and Blu-ray sign; concealed ceiling LED dimmable red 'sunset' lighting above the star ceiling; side downlighters built into the lighting rail to illuminate the walls; ceiling-mounted dimmable theatre lights at the front and rear for general illumination; low-level floor lighting, recessed into the walls; and a



Thermal insulation also added sound exclusion

Kit rack...



The electronics that make David's cinema room tick

Pioneer: BDP-LX70A Blu-ray player

Pioneer: XC-L7 amplifier

Sony: STR-DA2400ES 7.1 AVR

Sony: PlayStation 3

Bose: Acoustimass Dual Cube speakers

QAcoustics: 1000i series speakers

Technic: HD-198 projector

Primeview: EM82MW motorised 16:9 screen

Dell: OptiPlex 320 PC

Silvercrest: SL 65/12 satellite receiver

Silvercrest: Wireless keyboard and mouse

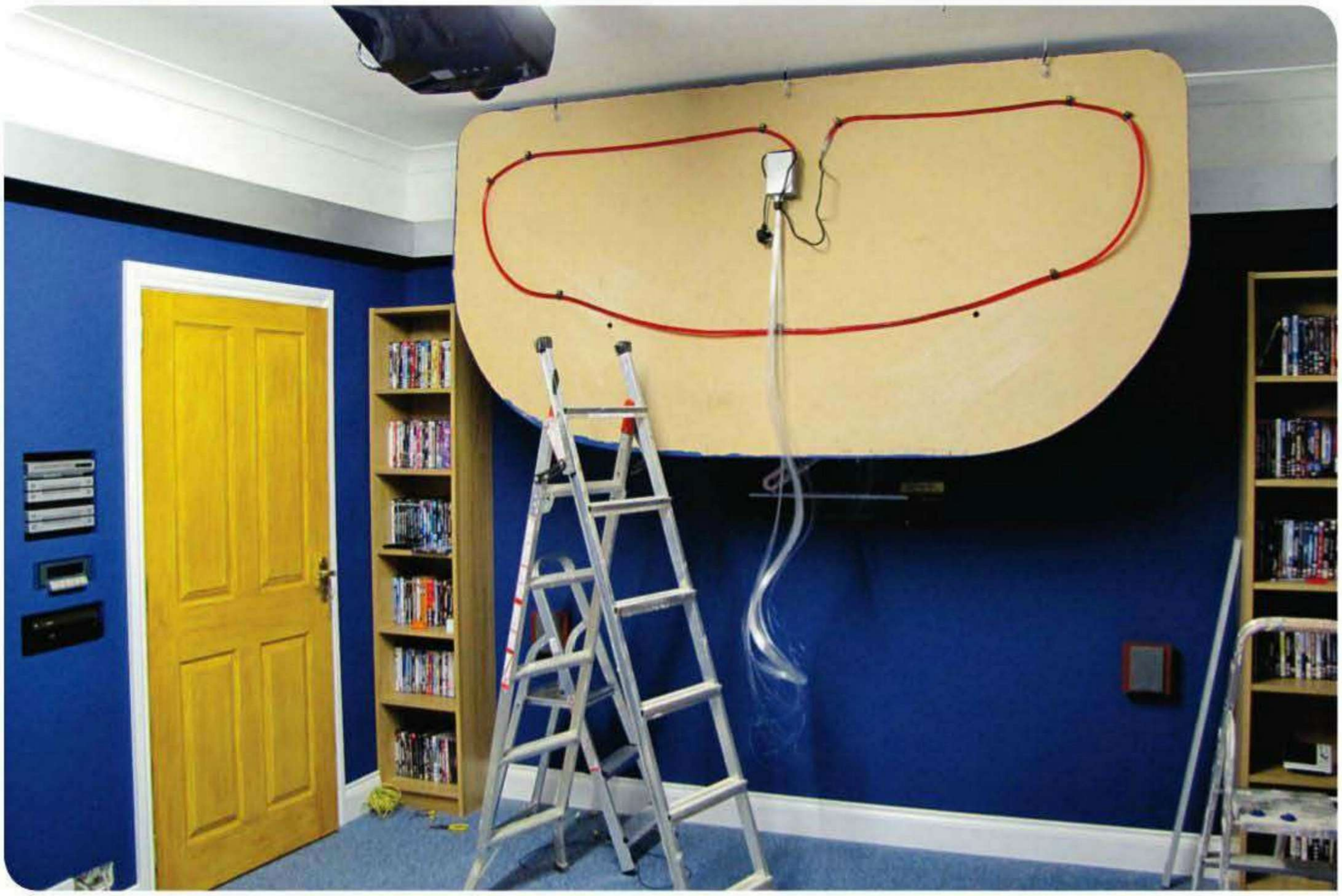
HomeEasy: 8x circuit dimming modules, HE-100 remote (pictured)

Logitech: Harmony 1000 Universal remote

Rathbone: LEC-302 Star Ceiling light engine

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suspended star ceiling of 200 fibre-optic cables driven by a colour selectable light engine.

'The lighting rail was constructed from 19mm softwood timber. The front rail is 150mm deep, and the underside 120mm wide. It was attached by battens screwed to the walls and set 350mm below the ceiling. To provide evenly spread uplighting to the ceiling, 18 metres of LED rope light was installed into the lighting rail, and carefully clipped into place. The LEDs can be dimmed to provide low background lighting if required. The same lighting rail incorporates the side downlighters to illuminate the walls.'

Having noted that a lot of home cinemas incorporate a star ceiling, David decided he wanted to include one in his design. However, limited access above the room, due to water storage tanks, meant this was not straightforward. To overcome this, the LED star ceiling light engine had to be incorporated into a suspended ceiling. This was constructed by attaching it with cables at the rear, thus allowing the suspended ceiling to hinge for installation and any subsequent maintenance. A red LED rope light was incorporated above the suspended star ceiling to give a 'sunset' effect.

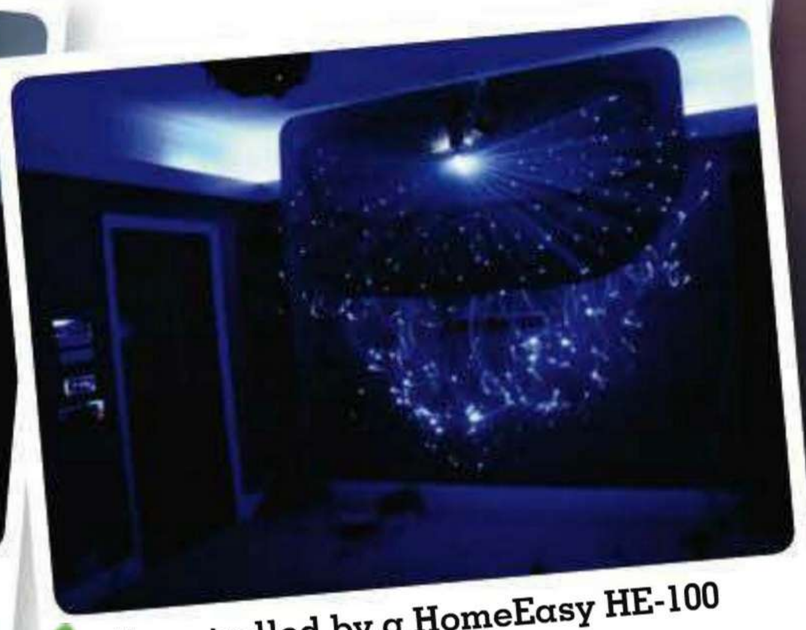
The low-level floor lighting units were sourced from Luma Lighting. Says David: 'I had noticed similar units in a local retailer's demonstration theatre, and thought they gave the room a movie theatre feel as well as being very practical, allowing some illumination without disturbing the darkened room.'

The LED light engine is secured onto a suspended ceiling, attached by cables at the rear that allow it to hinge for installation and maintenance

Next issue: The secrets of David's cabling system, installing the AV equipment, and the final results



The star ceiling and rope lights are part of the intelligent lighting system...



...all controlled by a HomeEasy HE-100 touchscreen remote



The AV equipment is built into the wall, but rear access can be gained from the adjacent garage

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Underground retreat

Chris Jenkins digs deep to discover this subterranean gem

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CEDIA judges' favourite: 'well considered and technically outstanding'

Designing a home cinema installation can be challenging enough, but having to do the work in a short time really sorts the men from the boys. St Albans-based installer FAB Audio Visual won a CEDIA Award for Best Home Cinema under £40,000 for this stunning system, designed for a client who was big on expectation, but short on time.

He had just brought the property from a developer and the basement room intended for use as a home cinema had been pre-wired for a basic media room set-up. When it became clear that he wanted something more ambitious, the positioning of the electrical points and to how to incorporate his AV requirements had to be decided within 48 hours.

FAB AV was able to deliver an impressive solution, which also enabled the room to be used as a family living area.

To keep the floor space uncluttered, a false wall was constructed to hide the three front speakers. A Digital Projection iVision30 projector provides the video signal, and is suspended from the ceiling behind the seating. Featuring a high light output of up to 3100 ANSI lumens, the projector produces stunning picture quality on the large screen, and was ideal for this installation as it is compact and practically noiseless.

The room is controlled by a Phillips Pronto TSU-9600 touch screen remote, a Crestron CP2E processor and a custom software module that FAB AV created to interface between the two. The video is switched by a Kramer Sierra Pro video controller, which is also part of the house-wide video distribution system. The spacious feel of the room is retained as all the equipment is hidden inside a full-height 19in rack in a mechanically-ventilated cupboard at the back.

As the room is also used for entertaining, the walls have been painted in light neutral tones to increase the impression of space. The Lutron lighting is controlled as part of the whole-house lighting system, including low-level floor washers below the screen to add impact. When a movie is selected on the controller, the amplification and source equipment power up, the lights dim and the environment is transformed at the touch of a button from a living room into a state-of-the-art home cinema.

→ Kit Checklist

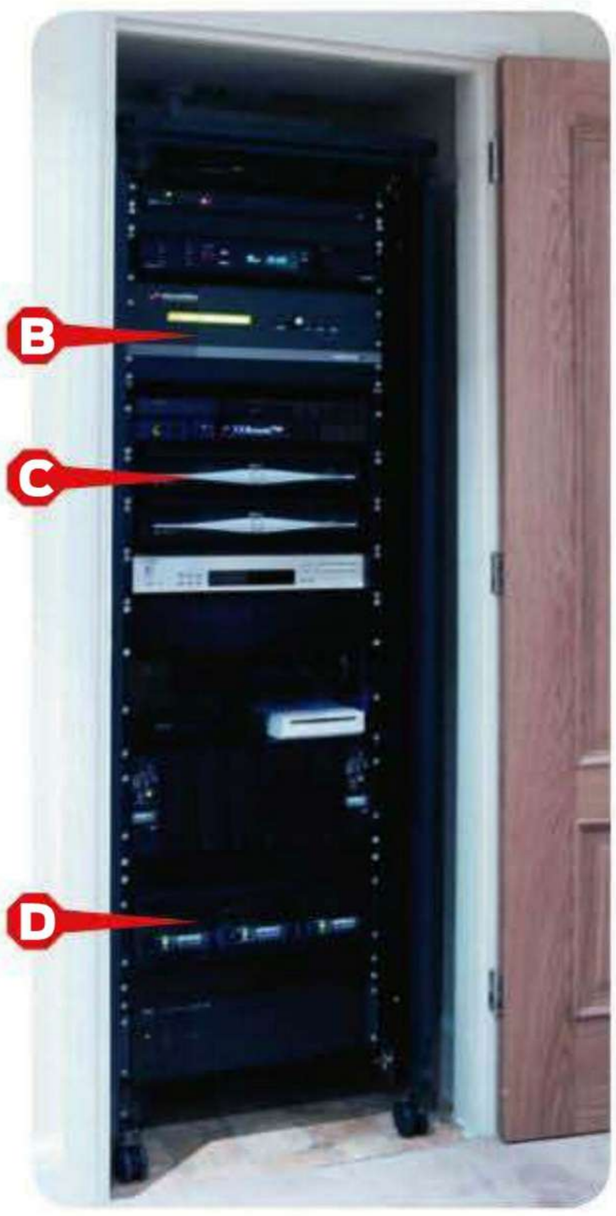
Digital Projection: iVision 30 DLP projector
Screen Excellence: 110in fixed 16:9 acoustically transparent projection screen
Onkyo: PR-SC5507 AV processor
Onkyo: BD-SP807 Blu-ray player
Sky: 2 x Sky HD receivers
Nintendo: Wii games console
Lutron: Homeworks system
Phillips: Pronto TSU-9600 touchscreen remote
Crestron: CP2E processor
FAB AV: Custom software module
Kramer: Sierra Pro video switcher
Genelec: 3 x AIW26 active speakers, 2 x AIW25 active speakers, 1 x HTS4B active subwoofer

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Room essentials

A Lights out
Mood lighting controlled by the whole-house system turns the room from a day-to-day living space into a dedicated home cinema

B High Sierra
The Kramer Sierra Pro video switcher selects which of the multiple sources in the rack is routed to the cinema

C Sky's the limit
There are two Sky+ HD boxes, as well as an Onkyo BD-SP807 THX Blu-ray player and a Nintendo Wii games console, in the equipment rack

E Silent runner
A Digital Projection iVision30 projector is fixed on the ceiling behind the seating position. It was chosen partly because its near-silent operation negates the need for a cabinet housing

F Subterranean sub
Compact but powerful, Genelec's HTS4B subwoofer claims a frequency range of 18-120Hz, and offers sensitivity, bass roll-off and crossover phase-matching controls that can be adjusted to suit different acoustical environments and positioning

G Heard but not seen
The rest of the Genelec active speakers are housed in-wall, adding another level of stealth to the system



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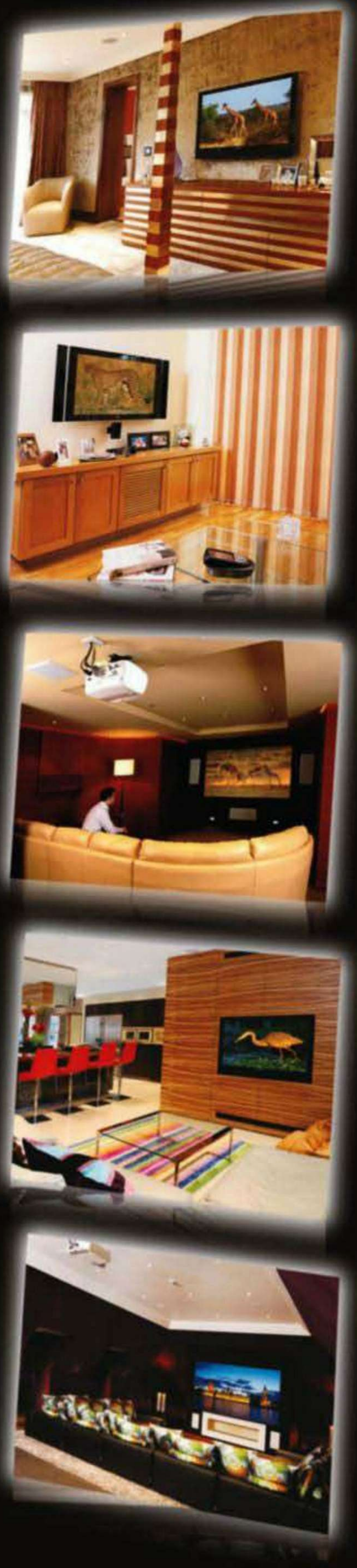
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These photos feature just a small selection of Musical Images' installation work over the past 20 years.

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Certified: AV-holic!

Every issue, an **HCC reader** invites you to take a tour of their beloved home cinema setup...







Out of control: AV-holic Phil converted a previous 'junk room' into this hi-tech picture palace

Introduce yourself...
My name is Philip Bignell. I'm a 31-year-old plater/fabricator.

And you're an AV-holic?
Yes! Ever since I bought my first TV when I was 16.

What's in your setup?
A JVC DLA-HD 550 projector takes care of the bigscreen duties. Sources include a Pioneer BDP-LX91 Blu-ray player, Sky HD 1 TB receiver, Sony PlayStation 3 (a 60GB model upgraded to 500GB), Xbox 360 Elite with HD DVD drive, Arcam FMJ 17 CD player and a 160GB Apple TV. The speaker system is 7.2, and features Bowers and Wilkins 683 fronts, B&W HTM 61 centre, a pair of B&W ASW 610XP subwoofers and four B&W CCM 682s – all driven by a Pioneer SC-LX82 AV receiver. Control is done by a Logitech Harmony 1100 with RF receiver and a Pioneer PDA-V100HD Switcher.

What was the last bit of kit you bought?
The last bit was the projector and screen when I converted my garage into a cinema.

And what's next?
Not sure. Maybe a Nevo remote or a Philips Pronto.

How much have you spent on your AV habit over the years?
I would think it's upwards of £30,000.

What does your partner/family think of the room?
I'm single, but my family think I'm mad. They still like the end result when watching a movie, though...

What's your current fave disc?
Just got *Tron: Legacy* which sounds fantastic, but it's not the best film in the world. *Man On Fire* or *Saving Private Ryan* are my choice.

Lastly, are you excited by 3D?
No. Leave it in the cinemas!



Room essentials

A Screen dream
A JVC DLA-HD550 projector provides the bigscreen pictures at the heart of this system

B Bower power
Phil's 7.2 system is made up entirely of Bowers & Wilkins speakers, including B&W 683 floorstanders for the front left and right channels

C Room for all
At least five people can sit back and relax in our AV-holic's home cinema setup

D Game on
While the Pioneer BDP-LX91 is on hand for Blu-ray duties, the PS3 (and Xbox 360) can be called upon for HD gaming

E Power on tap
This Pioneer SC-LX82 claims 7x 190W of amplification

Join the club

Do you want to see your home cinema system featured in the pages of *Home Cinema Choice*? If so, log on to **www.homecinemachoice.com/avholic** where you'll find all the information you need.

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How can TV calibration improve your home cinema? **Martin Pipe** puts theory into practice

Essential ambience: your viewing environment will affect the calibration process

Calibration is a comparison of measurements – one a known standard, the other a value under test. Applied to TV and projector images, it's all about making sure that the picture you see is as the director intended, because your system is adjusted to conform to standards set by the movie and TV industry.

One of the recognised champions of calibration is Joel Silver from the Imaging Science Foundation (ISF). He travels the world teaching calibration skills to AV industry professionals, and *HCC* caught up with him at an ISF Level 2 training session at the DTS facility in Twyford.

Why calibrate?

The three-day course was a valuable extension to *HCC*'s calibration skills; our test and measurement procedures are based very much on the way the ISF does things. But what can the enthusiast learn from these techniques, and can they be of real use in improving the performance of your home cinema setup?

The first thing you learn about calibrating TVs is that 'out of the box', they often give atrocious picture results. Compared to industry standards, the picture will be excessively bright, with colour and contrast levels best described as 'aggressive'. This is because most are preset to look attractive in the fluorescent lighting of a retail showroom. They won't look so good in domestic conditions, will be uncomfortable to view in the long term, and won't properly reproduce TV or Blu-ray pictures as they were meant to be seen.

Recently, some manufacturers have introduced a choice of presets that lie between 'home use' and 'showroom' settings. Others have even more advanced options, including ISF or THX presets. Obviously, if you have these modes you should select them. For serious movie viewing, steer clear of modes with names like 'Dynamic' or 'Vivid', which tend to emulate the showroom settings. But only proper calibration will give you perfect results, while helping your TV consume less power and so last longer in the process.

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Some TVs offer built-in pattern generators as calibration aids, but in most cases, your first step would be to buy a calibration disc containing patterns and demo sequences. The two best-regarded discs are *Digital Video Essentials* (available as DVD and BD), and *Spears & Munsil High-Definition Benchmark* (Blu-ray).

As a cheap alternative, most Sony Blu-rays have test patterns as an 'Easter Egg'. Press 7-6-6-9 then Enter to access them. There aren't any instructions on how to use them, but the Blu-ray of *Ratatouille* has some test patterns and instructions as an extra.

Test discs can help you adjust your picture by eye, but can't make objective measurements. For that you have to get hardware, such as the Datacolor Spyder3TV. This £60 gadget consists of a colorimeter – in other words, a light sensor that measures the output of your display – and a package of interactive PC software featuring test patterns and measurement routines. The sensor sits on the screen while the test patterns are displayed, and the system helps you to adjust colour levels, colour temperature, brightness and sharpness on your TV picture – but it doesn't relate it to industry standards. For that you need more expensive, professional colorimetry systems or the services of a professional calibrator.

The pro calibrator's job begins before the display's controls are even touched. Ambient lighting, room design, screen choice and even the effects of seating position have to be taken into account. Having addressed these issues, the calibrator has two main tasks: checking greyscale and colour repro.

Greyscale adjustments encompass brightness (black level), colour temperature, contrast (white level) and gamma (contrast range). Greyscale refers to the monochrome luminance (brightness) component of the picture. Eight-bit video, as used by DVD, current Blu-ray and digital broadcasting, allows 256 distinct levels, numbered from 0 (darkest) to 255 (brightest). Each corresponds to a different shade of grey. Levels 1 to 15 are 'below black', while levels 0 and 255 are not used.

In component video systems, the greyscale signal has its own channel, known as 'Y'. Most TVs have processing features that can distort their ability to reproduce greyscale, in a quest to produce pictures that are superficially impressive. It's common practice to turn these processing features off before beginning calibration.

Keeping it 'real'

As for colours, the calibrator's task is to ensure that fidelity is maintained at different luminance levels (known as 'grey-scale tracking). 'Before' and 'after' measurements are given to the client in a report, along with advice and training.

In component video, the greyscale/luminance signal (Y) is complemented by two 'colour-difference' signals known as R-Y (red minus the luminance) and B-Y (blue minus the luminance). In consumer digital video, three-quarters of the chrominance information is irretrievably discarded during encoding ('chrominance subsampling') in order to reduce data rates. Because the human eye is much less sensitive to colour information than greyscale detail (it contains far more luminance receptors than chrominance receptors) we can get away with this.

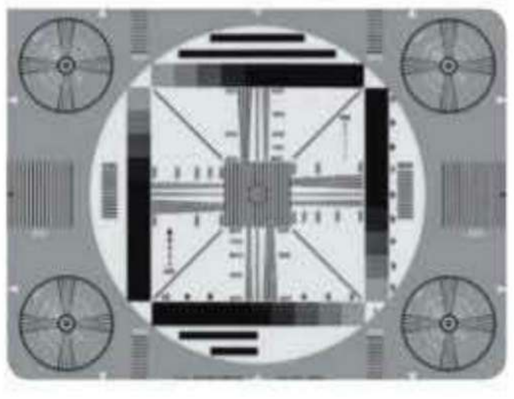
Equally important is colour temperature calibration. For accurate picture reproduction it's important to reference standard colour temperatures, measured in Kelvins. Lower colour temperatures, which look redder, are described as 'warmer', and higher ones as 'cooler'.

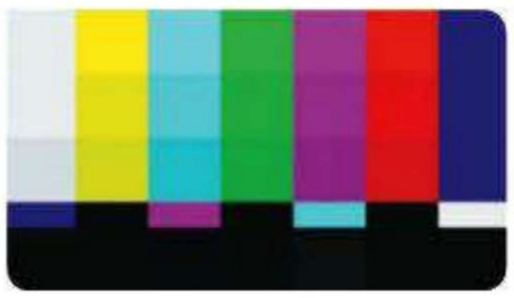
Various standards are in use, but we are interested mainly in PAL/NTSC and HD video displays, for which a colour temperature of 6,500K (sometimes called D65) is the industry standard.

Of course, the services of a professional calibrator don't come cheap (£300 per display is typical) but if you're serious about home cinema you'll find it worthwhile

Next issue we'll look at how measurement techniques can help you to produce more perfect pictures, whatever your home cinema setup







Test and measurement: you can find industry standard test patterns like these on test DVDs and Blu-ray discs

Turn the page to take our home cinema calibration quiz, and see how your technical knowledge matches up to our AV Mastermind!

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Can you beat the AV Mastermind?

Test your AV-tech savvy with questions compiled by **Martin Pipe** covering display calibration, digital television and home cinema audio.

1: What is the standard 'white point' for TV colour temperature?

A) 650ºC

B) 6500K

C) 1,000,000ºF

2: What does HDMI stand for?

A) Home Development Media Institute

B) High Definition Multimedia Interface

C) Hacking Defeats Machine Incompatibility

3: What use would you make of an SPL meter?

A) For measurement of sound pressure levels from your speakers

B) For checking the colour of the wallpaper in your home cinema

C) For testing the strength of the signal in speaker cable

4: Is 'white clipping' a good thing as far as flatpanel displays are concerned ?

A) No, it has the effect of crushing detail in brighter areas of the picture

B) Yes, it limits the dynamic range and hence reduces power consumption

C) Yes, it ensures that screen-burn does not affect plasma panels

5: Why is the human eye more sensitive to colour detail than luminance detail?

A) It isn't. Our eyes are equally sensitive to both

B) Because there are more cone receptor cells than rod receptor cells

C) Because there are more rod receptor cells than cone receptor cells

6: Is the mix of red, green and blue the same for HDTV as it is for standard def?

A) It doesn't matter, because HDTV uses YUV component distribution

B) Yes, both are identical. It's only a change in resolution, after all

C) No, for HDTV, the encoding matrix has a higher green weighting

7: What is a pluge?

A) The specialist process, in which the cores of a HDMI cable are precisely spaced apart thereby reducing unwanted crosstalk

B) A test pattern originally developed by the BBC

C) A now-defunct brand of flatpanel wall-mounting bracket

8: What test pattern will clearly demonstrate correct bit-mapping?

A) Pluge

B) 100% IRE whitescreen

C) Multiburst

9: If you are setting black level (brightness) too high, what will be the result?

A) Blacks will look grey, and the contrast ratio will be affected

B) Your display will not resolve fine detail so well

C) Overall dynamic range will be improved

10: How would you measure contrast ratio?

A) With a checkerboard pattern or white/black screens – measure the light output of the white and black sections with the appropriate tool, and express the readings as a ratio

B) Measure the light output of the seven segments of a colour bar test pattern, calculate the average and express them a ratio against black. It's important to factor in the effects of colour

C) Send your TV into deep space before carrying out the steps outlined in A or B, because Earth gravity will affect your readings

11: If people on your TV look like they have spent too long in the sun, will greyscale controls fix that problem?

A) Yes. Turn up the advanced menu's Green and Blue Bias controls.

B) No. The saturation ('colour') control should be your starting point here

C) No. If your TV has a 'tint' or 'phase' control, you should use that.

12: What is 'autostereoscopic' 3D?

A) 3D with active-shutter glasses

B) 3D with polarised glasses

C) 3D without the need for special glasses

13: Why might you switch the output resolution of your source to its 'native' or 'pass-through' setting?

A) Because scaling is usually done better by external processing, or the TV's internal scaler

B) Because sound quality is improved as the source's processing chips have less work to do

C) Because it forces you to use HDMI, rather than analogue component or Scart

14: Should you use digital rather than analogue connections?

A) Yes, because most sources and displays are digital [illegible] employ digital processing

B) No, because analogue has theoretically infinite resolution and so a wider range of hues and shades can be conveyed

C) Yes, because you can use a single HDMI cable for audio and video

15: Which sequence represents an ascending order of picture quality?

A) BBC iPlayer, DVD, Freeview, Blu-ray, VHS

B) VHS, BBC iPlayer, Freeview, DVD, Blu-ray

C) VHS, DVD, BBC iPlayer, Blu-ray, Freeview

16: What form of video processing increases the resolution of a source?

A) Deinterlacing

B) Denoising

C) Interlacing

17: Will a more powerful amplifier always give better results?

A) No. In the real world, you can get away with a fraction of the power we're told you need

B) No. All of those figures quoted in specifications are nonsense dreamed up by manufacturers to convince the gullible

C) Yes, so long as other factors such as connections and speaker specification are equal

18: Should I use a graphic equaliser in my system?

A) No, they're to be avoided at all times

B) Yes, a slight boost can improve treble clarity when centre speakers are mounted behind a projection screen

C) Yes, they can help with 'timbre-matching' if you have no option but to use unmatched speakers from different sources

19: What best describes the CIE 1931 chromaticity diagram?

A) A mathematically derived representation of colour space, invented by the International Commission on Illumination in 1931

B) A complex system for eliminating orange-faced TV presenters

C) A pretty triangular thing with lots of colours in it

20: What is MHEG-5?

A) A sinister global organisation featured in an episode of *Thunderbirds*

B) A video compression technology

C) A set of international standards for interactive television services, such as digital teletext

Answers on page 107

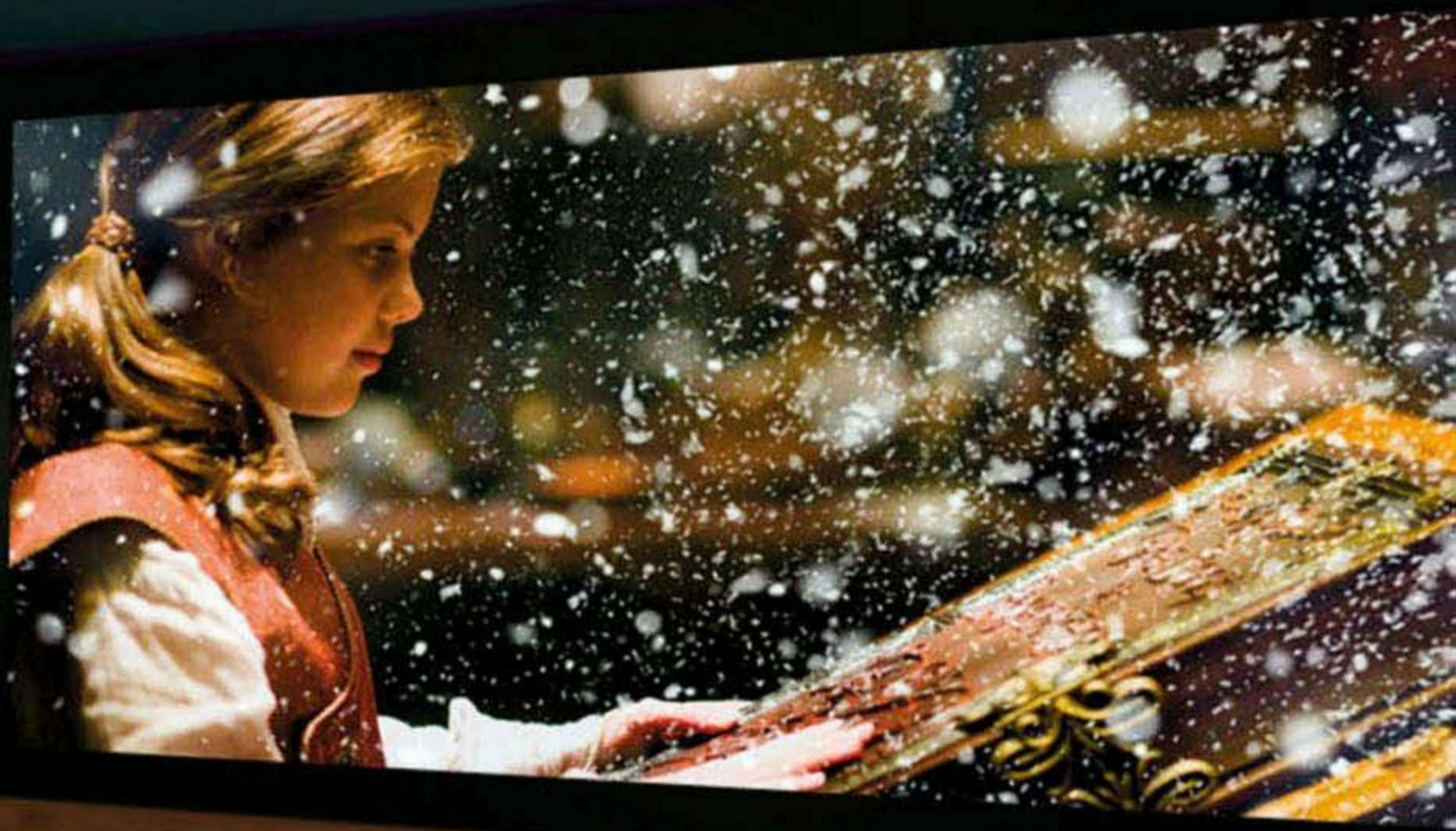
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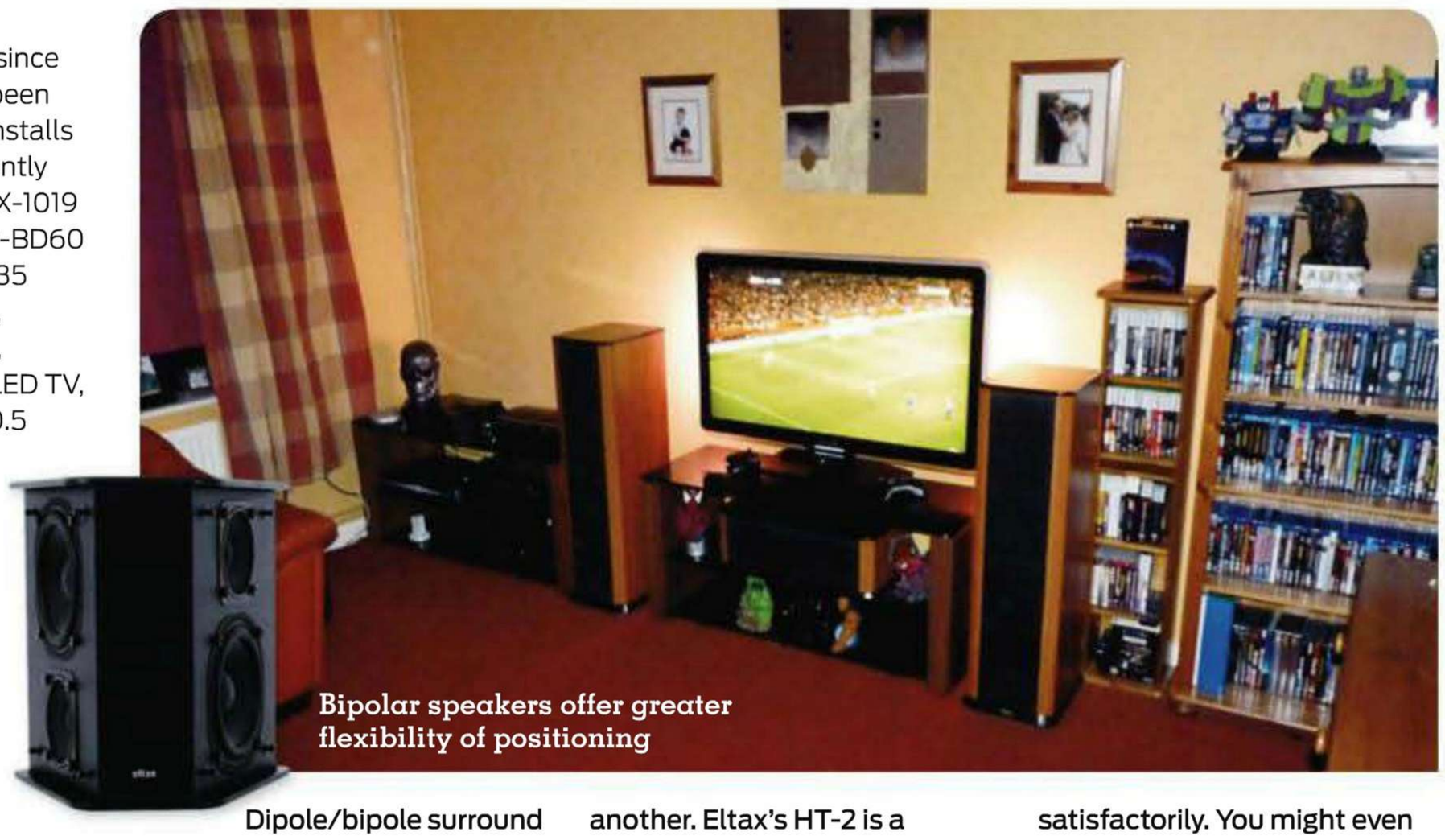
Is your sub-bass boomy, your picture peculiar or your cabling concerning? Write to **HCC** with your home cinema problems, and our team of experts will suggest the solution!

Dipole Dilemma

I have been buying *HCC* since the first issue and have been featured in the custom installs section. My system currently consists of a Pioneer VSX-1019 receiver, Panasonic DMP-BD60 and Panasonic DMP-BD35 disc players, Sky HD box, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Samsung 46D6750 3D LED TV, Eltax Linear Response 10.5 fronts and centre, Eltax HT2 bipoles and a Q Acoustics 1010si subwoofer with QED speaker cables and interconnect. I am currently re-doing my home cinema/living room and have to move my rear speakers, which are bipoles. Can I use them on the walls behind me instead of the side walls? I only have room to put them on the back wall.

The room is 18'x15' and I've used my amp's MCACC features to set up the system. I do have room on the side walls, but the speakers would be too high, and not in-line with each other as there is a door between them. Can you help?

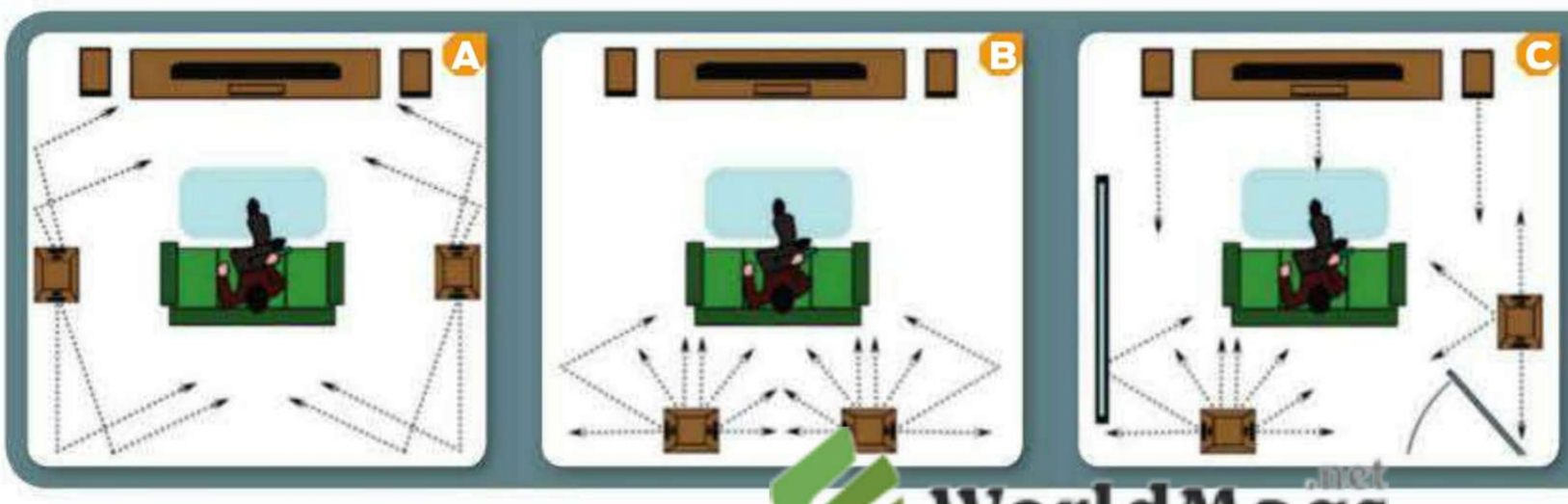
David Pickett, via email



Bipolar speakers offer greater flexibility of positioning

Dipole/bipole surround speakers are often advisable for movie surround sound use, as they can produce a diffuse soundfield and are fairly flexible in their positioning. They are most often seen in higher-end home theatre setups, where they produce 'room-filling' effects. The THX specification calls for bipoles in the rear and dipoles on the sides. Some speakers can be switched from one mode to another. Eltax's HT-2 is a bipolar rear/side surround speaker intended for wall or shelf mount, with a closed-box design and is described as offering a full frequency range with 'non-critical positioning'. So you probably could get away with using them on your rear wall, where they would provide a more diffuse effect than you would get with them on the side wall, but they would still be doing the job satisfactorily. You might even be able to use them unaligned, with one on a side wall and one on the rear. Your amp's MCACC system would help you to adjust the channel volume level settings to compensate.

Guy Singleton LCGI MIET MInstLM, Design Director, Imagine This (UK) Ltd, adds: In most theatres, and more often in home theatres, 'intelligent compromises' are



A: Dipole speakers create a diffuse soundfield when positioned on side walls

B: When positioned on a rear wall, speakers should be set to bipole mode to create a more ambient effect

C: Positioning of rear speakers is not as critical as that of front speakers, and channel levels can be adjusted to compensate

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Tricky mix: The Onkyo TX-SR805 feeds little output to the REL woofer

a major factor. Even commercial theatres make small compromises, from the exit lights to the aisles between seating locations. There are CEA, THX and CEDIA guidelines indicating loudspeaker placement, permitted reverberation times and seating layouts, but these are meant for dedicated theatre rooms, and multi-purpose spaces such as yours will always struggle to meet these criteria.

Ideally, if you are working with one pair of surround loudspeakers, they should be placed within the angular range of plus-or-minus 110° to plus-or-minus 120° in relation to the prime listening location. But most problems regarding particular pieces of kit and performance are secondary compared to treating the room. Some diffusion on the side walls and some treatment on the rear walls may help in this case; this doesn't have to be in the form of large unsightly diffusion panels, but could be anything that you can do to 'predictably' diffuse the sound reflecting from that wall. There are some really clever, modern and nice-looking panels available, but failing that you can try to position furniture such as a bookcase to provide a similar, if a little more unpredictable, effect!

Space Audyssey

I'm writing in the hope that you can solve an issue I'm having with integrating my subwoofer into the rest of my AV setup. My current system consists of an Onkyo TX-SR805 amplifier powering Definitive Technology Mythos 4 main speakers, M&K Xenon centre, M&K K4 tripole rears and a REL R205 subwoofer. My problem is that when I run the Audyssey MultEQ XT setup on the Onkyo amp (in six positions), the result is that I have very little output from the REL subwoofer. All other speakers seem very well balanced (volume and tone). I have tried running the setup with the subwoofer in various locations, with the subwoofer gain at various levels, but with similar results. I have resorted to running the setup with the subwoofer switched off to balance the other speakers and then dialling in the subwoofer manually, but now have a few areas of boom in the sub range which I was hoping the Audyssey setup would solve. Can you please tell me if I am doing something wrong, or if there is anything I can do to make the Audyssey set up work correctly on all speakers including the subwoofer?
Pete Wilson via email

Chris Jenkins says:
From our experience with Onkyo amps and the Audyssey system, the latter can work very well, but demands careful control of the environment and the test routines to make sure you get good results. Adjusting the level of the sub manually may be the best idea.

We suggest that you set up your speakers as close as possible to conventional speaker positioning rules, set your subwoofer's cutoff to maximum and set its level to half before calibrating. Try to use the subwoofer's direct input (or LFE input) in order to bypass the filters in the subwoofer and allow the bass management system in the receiver to operate properly. If there is no direct input, then the lowpass filter knob on the subwoofer should be set to the highest frequency it allows, the subwoofer volume control to its midpoint, and if there is a phase control, it should be set to 0°.

A lot seems to depend on the position you set the Audyssey microphone. You should first place it in the ideal listening position, the 'sweet spot', then try other positions in the room. Some users advise testing only in the listening position, arguing that there isn't much point in doing extensive measurements from positions where nobody will be listening, as this will only offset the readings for the sweet spot.

The cutoff levels the Audyssey system sets for you might not be ideal; check them against the quoted frequency range of your speakers. Raising the cutoff level may give speakers more headroom.

If you find that the Audyssey sets different levels or distances for speakers which are apparently in similar positions, check for reflections from the room; one side might have curtains, the other a bookshelf, for instance.

To enjoy the benefits of your subwoofer you have to make sure that the low-frequency content is being sent to it.

After testing is finished, check your speaker settings in the Setup Menu. If your AVR has set any speakers to Large or Full Range, change them to Small. If you don't, then there may be no bass playing from your subwoofer!

Some users find that ambient noise can be a critical factor when performing Audyssey readings. Even factors such as traffic noise can be crucial, so you may want to do your calibration at night!

Try testing with fairly bass-heavy material such as action movies or dance music, and adjust the sub's level to suit you. When used properly, the Audyssey system should make your sub integrate better, as well as improving factors such as centre-channel clarity and sound staging. It can't cure all ills, of course, and some problems can only be solved by treating the room

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Sevenoaks Sound & Vision **Bristol**
Sevenoaks Sound & Vision **Cheltenham**

Midlands
Music Matters **Edgbaston**
The Sound Academy **Bloxwich**
Castle Sound & Vision Ltd **Nottingham**

Wales
Sevenoaks Sound & Vision **Swansea**

North
Electrikery **Wilmslow**
Sevenoaks Sound & Vision **Sheffield**
Peter Tysons **Carlisle**
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REVIEWS

→Hardware highlights

YAMAHA 3D-capable 5.1-channel AVR
SHARP 46in Quattron LED screen **CAMBRIDGE AUDIO** High-end universal disc-spinner
LG Smart 3D Blu-ray player **PANASONIC** 65in flagship plasma TV **SIM2** Reference-grade 2D/3D PJ
PSB £1,500 Image 5.1 array **ROUNDUP** Five media players go head-to-head **AND MORE!**



Towering inferno

Is Acoustic Energy's Neo Max 7.1 system the hottest home cinema ticket in town? See p46 for our verdict

HCC Ratings key

Outstanding	1 2 3 4 **5**
Above average	1 2 3 **4** 5
Acceptable	1 2 **3** 4 5
Disappointing	1 **2** 3 4 5
Dire	**1** 2 3 4 5

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HCC DOESN'T BELIEVE IN OVER-PRAISING HARDWARE. CONSEQUENTLY, A THREE-STAR RATING SHOULDN'T BE CONSIDERED A BAD RESULT – IT SIMPLY MEANS THAT A PRODUCT PERFORMS ACCORDINGLY TO ITS CATEGORY POSITION. A FIVE-STAR RATING IS ONLY AWARDED IN EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

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38 SHARP LC-46LE831E ➜ £1,300 Approx ➜ www.sharp.co.uk

➜ Specifications

3D: *YES* Active Shutter Full HD: *YES* 1080p/24
Tuner: *YES* Freeview HD
Component video: *YES* one input
HDMI: *YES* 4 x v1.4 PC input: *YES* one D-Sub
Resolution: 1920 x 1080
Sound: 2 x 10W plus 15W subwoofer
Brightness (claimed): N/A Contrast ratio (claimed): 'Mega'
Dimensions: 1072(w) x 663(h) x 34(d)mm
Weight: 23kg
Also featuring: 100Hz plus scanning backlight (resulting in claimed '200Hz'); AQUOS Net+ online service; USB media playback (MP3, JPEG, HD video support included); DLNA support; USB wi-fi dongle included; colour and gamma management; noise reduction processing; 2D-3D conversion; Quattron colour technology; built-in subwoofer

Sharp's new Quattron screen looks classy thanks to its elegant black bezel

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Sharp follows the yellow-rich road

The brand's latest offering combines much-improved 3D talents with 'four-colour' technology to startlingly good effect, says **John Archer**



Despite the best efforts of a lab-coated George Takei in Sharp's 'Quattron' TV ad campaign, the brand's unique four-colour technology hasn't fired the imagination of Joe Public as much as was hoped.

I found Quattron's addition of a yellow sub-pixel to the usual red, green and blue ones an excellent innovation, but unluckily, its launch clashed with that of the first 3DTVs and was buried in that maelstrom.

But Sharp is out to reinvigorate its Quattron message with a TV that combines second-generation technology with active 3D playback.

The bezel is narrow and the rear impressively slim. The black finish looks glamorous and is offset nicely by a tasteful silver trim, while the aggressively angular bottom edge adds some panache, underlined by a tastefully illuminated Sharp logo.

The 46LE831E's 3D transmitter is nicely built into the TV's slender form. Not so good is the fact that no active shutter 3D glasses are supplied with the TV, although the telly isn't overly expensive for one this well-specced.

It's also making more effort to keep up with the Smart TV Joneses.

AV/CV

PRODUCT: A 46in edge LED TV with built-in active 3D playback

POSITIONING: Sharp's latest flagship TV

PEERS: Panasonic TX-P46GT30; Samsung UE46D7000

For a start, Its connections include three USBs, able to play a wide variety of music, photo or video files, including DivX HD. What's more, the screen ships with the USB dongle you need to make the TV wi-fi ready.

Big girl's browse

The set also has AQUOS Net+, an online system that includes a web browser, Skype functionality (via an imminent firmware update), and some 10 ring-fenced services that include eBay, YouTube and the FunSpot game channel.

Two things hit you about AQUOS Net+ right away. First, its presentation and content is very reminiscent of Philips' NetTV online system - no great surprise given that Philips and Sharp (along with German brand Loewe) have formed an online platform alliance. Second, AQUOS Net+ isn't currently in the premier league of online TV services. It doesn't have enough content in app or video server terms to rival what Samsung, LG, Sony and, to a lesser extent, Panasonic are offering via their TVs right now. The lack of the BBC iPlayer is particularly galling.

However, let's not forget that as with all cloud-based online systems, the set's AQUOS Net+ system can potentially be infinitely upgraded..

Focussing next on the 46LE831E's core picture technologies, it's lit by edge LED lighting, features a full HD resolution, and is driven by '200Hz' refresh rate (actually 100Hz plus a scanning backlight). This latter feature could prove significant in tackling the crosstalk problems that afflicted Sharp's debut 3D TV, the 60LE925E. In fact, the company claims its new lighting and refresh rate engine reduces crosstalk by up to 30 per cent.

Remote: Lightweight and plasticky, but proves easy to use thanks to a comfortable shape and a well-considered button layout



Also worth a mention is the set's energy efficiency. Adding a yellow sub-pixel to its screen makes each pixel more transmissive of light, a fact which joins with the edge LED lighting in allowing the set to bag an 'A' grade on the new European Energy rating system.

Setup is simultaneously liberating and frustrating. On the plus side, Sharp has been exceptionally diligent in providing enough tools to permit an almost pro-standard calibration job. There's a full colour management system, for instance, as well as gamma controls, and multiple settings for both the backlight scanning and the set's motion processing system. The bad news is that using the 46LE831E's reams of adjustments is made a chore by the set's operating system.

Cross to bear

In principle this OS is clever, comprising a double-axis system based around the bottom right of the screen that enables you to keep watching a mini version of the picture while you make your adjustments. The problem is that the scary-looking menus stick too slavishly to the cross-axis approach, so you don't get enough space to comfortably handle >

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Four eyes: The chunky active shutter glasses have to be purchased as an extra

the more complex features.

While getting the best from the 46LE831E's pictures might be a fiddly process, the results of your efforts are spectacular.

Where colours looked a touch wan on previous Quattron models, colours here look nothing short of radiant, with extremely rich saturations driven forth by a potent brightness performance. Furthermore, Sharp has combined this colour dynamism and brightness with a strikingly accomplished black level response that's far more satisfying than the black level response of any previous Quattron TVs.

In fact, it portrays dark scenes as convincingly as any other edge LED TV I can think of. Especially as this black level talent doesn't suffer badly at all with the sort of backlight inconsistencies still rife in the edge LED world. There are one or two v ery subtle, small patches of extra brightness if a very bright object or objects appear against a very dark background, but such moments are rare and controllable via manipulation of the TV's backlight.

For 3D, the 46LE831E's extreme brightness and colour saturations fight back admirably against the inevitable dimming effect of the brand's chunky, but effective, active shutter glasses.

The best thing about the 46LE831E's 3D pictures, though, is their lack of crosstalk. Bright scenes show practically no ghosting issues at all, and even dark scenes look clean and crisp for most of the time.

Removing crosstalk from its 3D experience makes it easy to appreciate the 46LE831E's impeccable sharpness with full HD 3D Blu-rays too. And this sharpness is even more obvious with 2D HD footage, where the clarity of good quality HD sources is exemplary.

This clarity is seldom reduced significantly by any motion handling concerns either, marking another area where this TV improves on Sharp's former LCD models.

The 46LE831E also delivers Sharp's best SD upscaling performance to date, adding sharpness, while keeping a lid on noise.

Sharp achievement

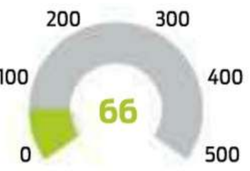
With the screen delivering a gaming-friendly input lag of just 39ms, is there anything bad about the 46LE831E's performance? At a push I'd say that yellow tones can look marginally out of balance with the rest of the colour palette. There are also the rare and minor backlight consistency issues already noted. But with even the 46LE831E's audio performance proving well above average, the set remains comfortably the finest mainstream TV Sharp has ever made and one of the best 3D TVs from anyone.

Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: An excellent result for a 46in set. Energy Save cuts consumption to 57W



Test footage: Real world power consumption is equally impressive

TV Contrast: Ratio



Picture: Post-calibration, contrast measured 94,000:1 – Dynamic mode yields 422,000:1

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets: The 'low' preset is closest to the 6500K ideal
Low: 6,800K
Mid-low: 8,300K
Middle: 9,500K
Mid-high: 10,600K
High: 12,400K

Menu: On Screen

Be 'appy: Sharp's AQUOS Net+ portal will be familiar to owners of Philips' TVs and BD players. Among the available apps are iConcerts, Box Office 365 and a full web browser



HCC VERDICT

Sharp LC-46LE831E
£1,300 Approx

Highs: Excellent 2D and 3D picture quality; luxurious design

Lows: Some marginal colour balance issues and slight backlight clouding; fiddly operating system

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

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A breath of fresh AVR hits the spot

Richard Stevenson is bowled over by the entry-level model of Yamaha's 25th anniversary amp line-up. How far does it punch beyond its price point?

There has been something of a dry spell for new AVRs of late. Months have passed without seeing one then, like buses, Yamaha launches the five-model strong RXV-x71 lineup all at once. To celebrate the 25 years since the launch of its Cinema DSP technology, Yamaha's fledglings get some cutting edge features and obligatory eco-friendly credentials, too.

While the flagship RX-V771 looks stunning on paper, I suspect this was a ruse by Yamaha just to tease us, because the RX-V471 turns out to be an absolute corker.

First off, gone are the symmetrical cosmetics from the 1987-AVR Designer's Handbook. They have been replaced with a slick and thoroughly contemporary, part-gloss fascia. Having dissed the brand's AVR aesthetics in print for nearly a quarter of a century, this is a revelation to me.

And it is equally sleek around the back where there are just enough essential connections, such as



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Yamaha's new AVR design is easy on the eye

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4-in 1-out v1.4 HDMIs, a selection of digital connections, component video and a Yamaha accessory port. There's no longer a dedicated dock for porting an iPod/iPhone, unless you want a wireless connection, for when both wi-fi and Bluetooth docks are available. Instead all five models in the range extract raw digital audio, play lists and even display album artwork from a standard USB input.

In my opinion, this more than makes up for a lack of network connectivity, delivering high-quality music-server functionality for the price of an iPod. There is a Compressed Music Enhancer in the DSP modes, but my advice would be to buy your iPod big and go VBR or lossless for best sound quality. Of course, at this price you only get five channels of amplification for Dolby and DTS 5.1 formats, at a claimed 100W a-piece (although our Tech Labs rate them lower).

Research pays off

It is also clear that more than a few months of research and development have been lavished on the user interface, too. The RX-V471 boots up fast with a colourful high- definition image of a Yamaha piano on screen.

Flat controller: Puts you in charge of the super-simple GUI menu



A single press of the remote has the full-colour GUI overlay sliding up from the bottom of the screen offering a raft of easy-to-follow options. Once the supplied set-up mic is installed (in the correct port and not, as I did, into the fascia-mounted 3.5mm input jack) the receiver automatically pulls up the auto set-up menus. Powered up, the receiver makes a few suitably eye-watering noises and announces all is well in under two minutes.

The YPAO room EQ system is a fairly basic incarnation of the technology and offers no manual adjustment beyond three presets. The GUI overlay enables you to play content and flick between each mode easily to select whichever you prefer. Ironically, in a blind test, I ended up plumping for the 'EQ off' mode, but in a standard living room which has less than optimal speaker positioning I suspect the YPAO will come into its own.

The features list is not too shoddy for a £300 receiver and concentrates on those that will actually get used rather than specification trumps. There is no video upscaling, but you do get HDMI input switching in the frugal 1.2W standby mode for those days when you just want to watch and listen to the TV.

On fire

At all other times the RX-V471 delivers performance to set your socks on fire. Sounding agile, potent and incredibly detailed, this little receiver would give last year's £800 models a run for their money in pure performance. Within seconds of spinning up *Iron Man* on Blu-ray I was hearing little details that older models at twice the price would gloss over.

As Stark emerges from the imprisoning cave, the LFE handling is sharp and visceral. This is no slow-burn performer that you might warm too; this is an immediate wow-factor machine that punches >



AV/CV

PRODUCT: Budget 5.1-channel AVR celebrating 25 years of Yamaha's Cinema DSP

POSITION: One up from the bottom in the new five-strong RX-Vx71 receiver lineup

PEERS: Denon AVR-1612; Onkyo TX-NR509; Pioneer VSX-521

→ Specifications

Dolby TrueHD: *YES* and DD Plus
DTS-HD Master Audio: *YES*
THX: *NO*
Multichannel audio: *YES* 5 x 105W
Multichannel input: *NO*
Multi-room: *NO*
AV inputs: *YES* 5 x composite video & phono audio 4 digital audio inputs (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial)
HDMI: *YES* 4-in 1-out v1.4
Video upscaling: *NO*
Component video: *YES* 2-in, 1-out
Dimensions: 435(w) x 363 (d) x 151(h) mm Weight: 8.2kg
Also featuring: New full-colour hi-def GUI; HDMI switching in standby, iPod/iPhone control with album artwork on screen; Cinema DSP 3D with 17 presets; Compressed Music Enhancer; Burr-Brown 192/24bit DACs for all channels; Adaptive Dynamic Range Control (DRC); SILENT Cinema; Black or Titanium finish; USB reader with WMA, MP3, FLAC and WAV support; FM/AM tuner; YPAO RoomEQ with supplied microphone; headphone input; HDMI 3D passthrough; HDMI Audio Return Channel; front AV inputs

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Rear-mounted connections: There's a fairly low connection count, but all the essentials are here

out a holographic surround soundstage with precision that I have not heard in any AVR the affordable side of £500.

I considered it may be the preceding dry-spell of amps that let the Yamaha gain my affections, so I garnered a second opinion. Mrs S. has been exposed to a lot of AVRs over the years, so I played two scenes from different discs and asked her to guess the price of the Yamaha. She plumped for '£600-£800'. Okay, so it's not just me then.

The RX-V471's winning quality is undoubtedly its superb balance, which seems to let the dialogue, effects and action shine through. This pulls you into the movie, letting you forget about the electronics and speakers and simply enjoy the plot.

It is the result of a very clean sound through the mid-range; open, spacious and free from any congestion. Effects such as the spent bullet cases dropping to the floor have a wonderful metallic quality and the RX-V471 places each one with individual precision. Bass effects are robust and punchy without being overbearing and the top end deliver plenty of sparkle.

On one hand the sound is much firmer and fruitier than the competition, yet feed the AVR a diet of drama and it offers unrivalled clarity at this price, too. *The King's Speech* is delivered with intensity and gravitas, underpinning the anguish of Colin Firth's King George with superb realism. I found myself holding your breath, willing the character to enunciate the next stammered word.

This rare combination of power and precision makes the RX-V4[illegible] something of an all-rounder, equally at home with family-friendly Disney fun as it is 18-cert action mayhem. To test the point, I slipped in the original *Ice Age* on Blu-ray and another thoroughly entertaining 90 minutes slipped by.

Even nudging the volume skyward results in a very pleasant surprise. While most budget receivers start to struggle and harden up when the volume gets much beyond –5dB, the Yamaha finds untapped reserves, simply powering into seriously 'neighbour-unfriendly' territory. With 0dB showing on the clock, the sound retains its fine balance and clarity with the bass effects threatening to bring down the light fittings. Great fun? You bet.

The iPod/iPhone hook-up is simplicity itself, using no more than the Apple supplied USB lead. The RX-V471 quickly lists all the tracks and artists. Once you hit Play, the GUI pulls up the cover art work from the device a few seconds later – all controlled by the Yamaha's simple remote. Further up the model range you get App control as well, but I guess at this price point you can't have everything.

Style, substance, value

While more affluent receivers offer more power, greater resolution and additional features, I can't remember a time when a budget AVR impressed me so much. It is stylish on the shelf, amazingly easy to use, offers a useful set of features and tops it all off with comfortably class-leading sound at the price. Clearly Yamaha is celebrating the 25th anniversary of Cinema DSP in style, leaving the competition a whole lot to do to better the RX-V471.

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts

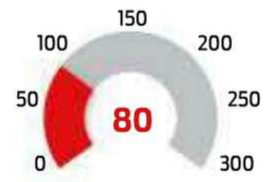


Idling: A typical idling figure for an AVR of this spec

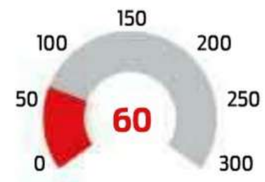


Powered: Our real-world test recorded an average consumption of 110W

Power ratings: Watts (8Ω, 0.5% THD)

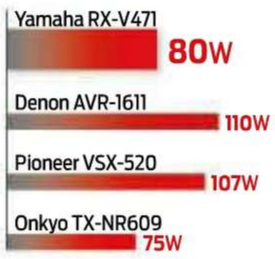


2-channel 8Ω: A solid figure from such an affordable AVR



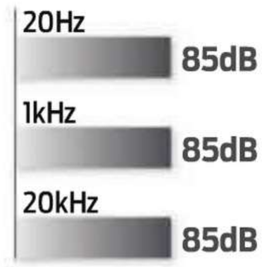
5-channel 8Ω: There's an expected drop off in multichannel mode, leaving the RX-V471 somewhat below spec

Untainted: Watts



Fidelity firewall: A measure of power achieved before distortion becomes unacceptable (0.02% THD). The Yamaha is similar to its rivals

Signal/noise: dB



S/N tests: Good, but not excellent across all frequencies

Menu: On Screen



Configuration: A visual representation of the speakers/woofer placings helps you calibrate your own room setup



HCC VERDICT

Yamaha RX-V471
£300 Approx

Highs: Class-leading sound; useful features; fabulously easy to use

Lows: No networking or zone 2 output, little manual control of RoomEQ

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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AV/CV

PRODUCT:
7.1-channel speaker system

POSITION:
More powerful step-up version of the Neo V2 system

PEERS:
Magnat Quantum 650; XTZ 99 Series; Monitor Audio Bronze



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AE takes it to the Max

Danny Phillips checks out an affordable 7.1 speaker array

Slapping the word 'Max' onto the end of your product name doesn't automatically make it great, as anyone who's tasted Pepsi Max can attest. But in the case of Acoustic Energy's Neo Max system it seems entirely appropriate.

AE's original 5.1-channel Neo V2 system was a serious proposition in the first place, but this beefed-up version adds even more firepower to its already considerable arsenal. It increases the speaker count to 7.1 and swaps the Neo Threes in the original system for a pair of the company's new Neo Four floorstanders.

This injection of sonic steroids was prescribed after AE's customers started demanding a more potent floorstanding speaker for the Neo lineup, capable of bringing more detail and bass depth than the smaller Neo Threes could muster. That means a higher price too, but at just under £2,000 you're still getting a lot of speaker for your money.

Meet the ensemble

Alongside the Neo Four fronts (£699 a pair separately), you get a pair of shorter Neo Three floorstanders for the rears (£409 a pair), £229 Neo One bookshelf speakers on surround back duties, the £179 Neo Centre and the £409 Neo Subwoofer.

But first we'll inspect the new kids on the block. The Neo Fours are an imposing, majestic presence that'll cast sizeable shadows over your living space with their 1.2m tall, 70-litre cabinets. They weigh a fair amount too. But they have the sort of muscular build quality we love at

Ho[illegible] speaker muscle: the [illegible]-high Neo Four fronts cast a long shadow

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HCC and much better than you have any right to expect for their price.

But for all their bulk, Acoustic Energy has done a terrific job of making them look elegant and contemporary, with curves all over the shop and a luxurious Vermont walnut or Black Ash finish. Cover the drivers with the magnetic grilles if you want, but I think they look far funkier without them. For setup, you need to screw on the black plinths. Attaching the supplied spikes is entirely up to you.

The Neo Four's internal design is just as attractive, particularly the 32mm-thick MDF baffle which helps to ensure tight, potent bass response. They use a three-way, triple-ported design, with a 5in aluminium alloy midrange driver, a pair of 6.25in bass drivers and a wide-bandwidth 1in dual-ring radiator tweeter.

Another key element in the Neo Four's technical make-up is the choice of material used for the magnets. Interestingly, the Neo Fours use Ferrite magnets instead of neodymium, which is used by all the other speakers in the system and is how the range gets its name. (The irony of range-topping speakers not using the technology they're named after has not escaped us!)

But there's method in the madness – Acoustic Energy's engineers preferred a ferrite system in order to deliver the extra punch required by these larger, more voluminous cabinets. And what a punch they pack; there's 200W quoted power handling and a frequency response of 28Hz all the way up to 40kHz.

The rest of the system, from the bookshelf boxes up to the 905mm-high Neo Threes, boasts equally awesome construction. Again, there's a choice of Vermont and Black Ash finishes and they share the smoothly curved corners as the Neo Fours.

These rear floorstanders are a two-and-a-half way, reflex-loaded design featuring a 1in neodymium ring radiator tweeter, and a pair of 5in low/mid drivers. The two-way Neo One bookshelves lose the second low/mid driver.

The importance of dialogue to your movie enjoyment hasn't escaped AE's attention either and as such the Neo Centre boasts the same two-and-a-half way driver array as the Neo Threes. It's a hefty box though, likely to require quite a reshuffle to house it.

AE hasn't felt the need to introduce a new subwoofer for this Max system, so you get the same bass-box as the original Neo V2 array. Thankfully it's up to the task, endowed with a 200W Class A/B amplifier, and an 8.5in drive with a long-throw ferrite magnet.

All this brawn is bundled up in a beautiful box, styled in the same classy-looking finish. You should have no trouble getting it to integrate with the other speakers thanks to the wide range of controls found on the rear panel. Volume, crossover and phase can all be tweaked to your heart's content, as well as less common adjustments such as notch filters for frequency, Q and attenuation, which can help rectify any problems you have with room acoustics. You also get line-level stereo inputs and outputs, plus a separate line-level input.

Controlled power

What all this amounts to is a performance that's frighteningly potent and heart-meltingly silky all at once. The extra grunt afforded by the addition of the Neo Fours is instantly clear; they fire out frenetic action scenes with greater ferocity, pumping the room full of sound. As a result, the scale of the soundstage is immense. But despite that, the entire sonic spectrum is delivered with a sophisticated tone and few rough edges to sully your listening pleasure.



The Neo Max system features 22 separate drivers



A Black Ash finish is also available

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With the remarkable tracking shot during the refugee camp siege at the end of *Children of Men*, the Neo Max system shows the full range of its talents. When the army blows up the tower block, the explosion is brutal, conveyed with tautness and depth by the superb subwoofer. And as the debris rains down, it shows its ability to handle delicate high-frequency detail, relaying the popping and rustling as little showers of rock hit the ground with pin-sharp clarity.

The soundstage it conjures is wide and spacious, with distant voices and gunshots drifting in and out of earshot from all over the room. **It's a dynamic, engaging performance, demonstrating power, agility and subtlety from every speaker** and throwing considerable force behind the effects that really need it.

And despite the disparity in sizes, Neo Max ensures tonal consistency across the system, creating a wonderfully coherent, tightly-locked sound that immerses you in the action. You can also push them loud without distortion or high-frequency edginess, and they handle everything with a level of composure befitting a far more expensive set of speakers.

I switched over to *Hellboy II*'s 7.1-channel DTS HD Master Audio soundtrack and was equally bewitched. There isn't a weak link in the chain. The Neo Threes at the back offer levels of detail insight and bass depth that almost rival the Fours at the front, making the thumping effects during the battle with the Golden Army feel weighty and solid; the Neo Ones are smooth operators too, handling the eerie ambience of the movie's fantastical settings with sparkling clarity; while the centre channel delivers dialogue with openness and authority. The subwoofer doesn't let the side down either, resulting in an overall listening experience that borders on an epiphany at this price.

Used as a stereo pair for music, the strength and poise of the Neo Fours again pays dividends. As well as reproducing kick drums and basslines with terrific depth and agility, it digs out nuances higher up the scale and produces vocals that you can really believe in.

This wonderful performance makes the 7.1 Neo Max system an absolute winner in my eyes (and ears), and the fact that you're getting it for under £2K is an even more compelling reason to check it out

→Specifications

Neo Four fronts

Drive units: 2 x 6.25in pressed alloy LF cones, 1 x 5in midrange cone, 1 x 1in Neodymium Ring Radiator tweeter
Enclosure: Triple-ported, MDF
Frequency response: 28Hz-48kHz
Sensitivity: 91dB
Power handling: 200W
Dimensions: 203(w) x 1200(h) x 300(d)mm **Weight:** 28kg

Neo Three rears

Drive units: 1 x 5in pressed alloy cone low-mid driver, 1 x 1in Neodymium Ring Radiator tweeter
Enclosure: Reflex-loaded, MDF
Frequency response: 43Hz-45kHz
Sensitivity: 90dB
Power handling: 170W
Dimensions: 203(w) x 905(h) x 242(d)mm **Weight:** 14kg

Neo Centre

Drive units: 1 x 5in pressed alloy cone low-mid driver, 1 x in Neodymium Ring Radiator tweeter
Enclosure: Reflex-loaded, MDF
Frequency response: 75Hz-40kHz
Sensitivity: 90dB
Power handling: 120W
Dimensions: 480(w) x 178(h) x 195(d)mm **Weight:** 9kg

Neo One surround backs

Drive units: 1 x 5in pressed alloy cone low-mid driver, 1 x in Neodymium Ring Radiator tweeter
Enclosure: Reflex-loaded, MDF
Frequency response: 60Hz-40kHz
Sensitivity: 89dB
Power handling: 120W
Dimensions: 182(w) x 357(h) x 231(d)mm **Weight:** 6kg

Neo Sub

Drive units: 8.5in pulp cone with high power long-throw magnet system
Enclosure: Closed box
Frequency response: Down to 26Hz
On board power: 200W
Dimensions: 360(w) x 410(h) x 325(d)mm **Weight:** 17kg
Connections: Phono stereo input and output, AV line in



HCC VERDICT

Acoustic Energy Neo Max
Approx £1,900

Highs: Lots of box for the money; sensational sound quality
Lows: Might be a little imposing for some rooms; need two people to shift them as they weigh a lot

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

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50 LG BD670 ➜ £170 Approx ➜ www.lg.com/uk



Don't let the dour exterior put you off: there's lots to discover inside

3D is just the start

For a Smart Blu-ray player the LG BD670 is decidedly scruffy, but, says **Steve May**, beneath its lacklustre facade lies a feast of functionality

LG is currently embroiled in a Smart TV war with rival Samsung for dominance of the net-connected landscape. In both TV and Blu-ray, the pair are going head to head with similarly monikered portals (Smart TV and Smart Hub) stuffed with comparable apps and streaming video content.

A cursory glance might indicate that there's not much between the two brands. But just how compelling is LG's Intelligence Quotient?

Style bypass

Certainly, at first glance the BD670 doesn't look particularly smart. It's quite scruffy in fact; from its dull black plastic body, to the embossed buttonry, it's a bit of a duffer.

Rear side connectivity comprises a single HDMI, Ethernet LAN, optical digital audio, phono AV and component. There's only one USB port and that's on the front. This is an inconvenience as the player lacks persistent memory for BD Live applications, so you'll have to live with a thumbdrive sticking out the front if you use BD Live, swapping it over when you want to play media.

At least there's no need for a wi-fi dongle. That's built-in and works well. You can connect via WPS (if your router supports this) or manually. I took the latter route, and popped the player wirelessly on my network in as much time as it took me to plod around the soft-keyboard.

Thankfully, the BD670 smartens up its act considerably when you get to the user interface. The main Home menu consists of a jolly line of colourful f[illegible]tic[illegible] buttons,

AV/CV

PRODUCT: LG BD670 Smart Hub 3D Blu-ray player

POSITION: Despite the modest price, sits at the top of LG's Blu-ray player lineup

PEERS: Samsung BD-D7500; Sony BDP-S480

designated Movie, Photo, Music, Premium and Apps. Click on any one of the first three and the player will show you other DLNA/uPnP clients on your network, allowing you to drill down and stream your stuff.

For online content options, hit the remaining buttons. Premium takes you to LG's streaming portal (which bizarrely appears to reside at the fork in a virtual road, if the background graphic is anything to go by). There's a fair amount of entertainment on tap. In addition to BBC iPlayer and YouTube there's DailyMotion, Acetrax, Cinetrailers and internet radio service VTuner. Filling out the roster is some easy-to-ignore Googlemaps twaddle.

Hop over to the apps store and there's more to explore. Curiously, sandwiched between various colour

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Specifications

3D: *YES*
Upscaling: *YES* to 1080p
Multiregion: *NO* Region B BD/R2 DVD
HDMI: *YES* one v1.4a
Component: *YES* one
Multichannel analogue: *NO*
Digital audio: *YES* optical digital output
SACD/DVD-A: *NO/NO*
Dolby True HD/DTS HD decoding: *YES/YES*
Dolby True HD/DTS HD bitstream: *YES/YES*
Profile 2.0: *YES* But no internal storage for BD-Live
Dimensions: 430(w)mm x 49(h)mm x 202(d)mm
Weight: 1.8kg
Features: Smart TV content portal; Ethernet; USB media playback; network media streaming; Track ID



blindness tests and a typo-ridden Keep Fit tutorial, I found more than a dozen movies, all free to watch. Ultra-low budget indie efforts, they have rather inventively sidestepped traditional movie distribution to end up as download fodder. I don't mind saying that I was rather chuffed with this haul. It's like suddenly discovering a film festival on your doorstep. Treats like this make Smart TV tech such fun to own.

The BD670 can also stream media across a network and from USB, with a generally good hit rate. MP3s play, along with album art when available, as do AAC files, although both FLAC and WAV are off limits, and for reasons I can't explain, my standard WMA test rolled out at high-speed. Video file support over the network covered AVI, MKV and MOV content.

Disc playback

Hi-def image quality is suitably sharp. The deck scrapes a massive amount of detail from 2D HD platters. *Battle: LA* looks sumptuous. Shot in a high-framerate HD, shakey-cam style, skin tones and textures pop from the screen. The player also does a reliable job disgorging the DTS-HD MA soundtrack.

Stereoscopic footage has the potential to look equally sharp. Of course much depends on what your display will do to the image before it hits your peepers. At least the deck itself does a fine job. Naturally, the BD670 is quite at home with home-grown, DIY 3D shot in AVCHD.

Disc loading is a tad tardy. The player took a lazy one minute 6 seconds to go from tray to *Bond* logo, on the Java-heavy *Goldfinger* BD. Simpler discs load rather faster.

As a CD spinner, the BD670's performance is functional. With no Super Audio CD compatibility to give it a resolution boost, this player's unlikely to convert too many audiophiles to its cause. But its overall presentation is fun: when playing a CD, it pulls album art direct from the Gracenote database; it also features Music ID, designed to identify any tunes in a platter you're playing, at the touch of a button (it sometimes works)

As a DVD player, the BD670 does a decent job. My venerable Silicon Optix HQV test platter confirms deinterlacing and upscaling to be of a creditable standard. If you've a large collection of SD discs, they'll be in reasonable hands here.

Overall, the BD670 is a great value net-connected disc spinner. Sure, it might have the sartorial style of an impoverished funeral director who dresses in the dark, but it's jazzy where it counts.



More buttons than Cinderella: The controller tries not to upstage the player... and succeeds

Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts

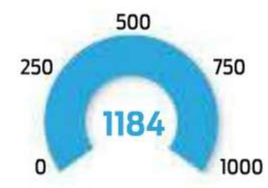


Idling: Compared to modern decks from its big brand rivals, this LG player is quite thirsty



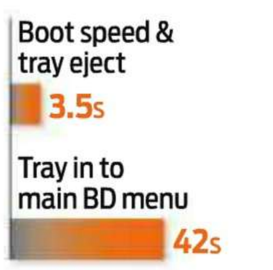
Powered: Consumption barely increases with disc playback

Audio Jitter: ps



Sound: Audio jitter is mediocre, although we measured an impressive video jitter figure of 4ns

Loading: Boot/Java



Disc loading & Java: Superfast to boot, but average loading time

Menu: On Screen



Main home menu: Colourful icons let you know what's what on LG's slick home page



HCC VERDICT

LG BD670
£170 Approx

Highs: First-rate collection of 'net-connected content; solid media streaming
Lows: Dull to look at; a clattery disc loading tray; only one USB

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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A chip off the old speaker block

Mark Craven auditions the baby brother to an *HCC*-award winning system – and finds AV performance runs in the family



AV/CV

PRODUCT: Floorstanding 5.1 speaker system

POSITION: Below the Imagine and Synchronicity ranges

PEERS: Monitor Audio BX5 5.1; Acoustic Energy Neo V2

PSB, named after founders Paul and Sue Barton, isn't a particularly well known brand in the UK. Yet this Canadian outfit, distributed in Blighty by home cinema specialists Armour Home, makes some pretty tasty surround sound speaker packages that are worth consideration.

Its Imagine 5.1 array, reviewed back in *HCC* #188, scooped our annual award in the Best Speaker System, £2,000-£5,000 category. That £3,000 package blew us away with its build quality and full-range sonic performance, and left us wondering what the brand's high-end models sounded like.

Well, we're still wondering, as the next set of PSB speakers we've clapped eyes and ears on in is this more affordable step-down range.

Dubbed Image and hinting at its shared heritage with the more potent Imagine line, these cabinets deliver, 'affordable high performance', according to PSB.

The 'performance' element will come later, but PSB certainly has the 'affordable' part sorted. Our audition setup retails for a very appealing £1,500, putting it in the same price bracket as other cash savers such as Acoustic Energy's Neo V2 and KEF's T-Series.

Back in black

Tastes in speakers will always vary, but I'm happy to say that Images are things of beauty. The black wood finish (also available in dark cherry if that's your thing) aches to be stroked, and there are subtle curves aplenty. Remove the grilles (no magnets here, I'm afraid – but costs have to be cut somewhere) and they look even better, with their yellow driver cones, PSB-branded tweeters and dividing line down the front fascia. **If you can trust your family and pets not to damage them, I'd keep the grilles off at all times**.

The floorstanders of this £1,500 array are the T5 models. These tower just under a metre high and use a two-and-a-half-way design with identical 5.25in bass drivers (but with different crossovers) and a 1in tweeter. The enclosure is front-ported and around the back are twin sets of speaker posts, giving you the option of bi-wiring/bi-amping.

The tweeter is a titanium affair, with Ferrofluid-cooling and a neodymium magnet – the same sort of high-quality driver found in the Imagine lineup, which bodes well for high-frequency delivery.

There are more potent Image floorstanders available, such as the T6, which drop one of the 5.25in midrange drivers and bring in a pair of 6.5in woofers in a three-way design.

The same tweeters and bass drivers of the T5 are used on the B5 bookshelf speakers and the sizable C5 centre.

Taking care of the low-end is PSB's 150W, 10in SubSonic 5i subwoofer. This isn't solely part of the Image lineup and it shows somewhat in its design, which, despite the matching finish, seems a tad more in-yer-face than the other cabinets. But that's how I like my woofers, anyway.

After a flick-through of the excellently written and idiof-proof manual, the array was plumbed into our resident Onkyo TX-NR5008 receiver. And good things started to happen...

Full-bodied 5.1

With both movie material and music, the PSB Image system delivers an appealing sound that's easy on the ear. It's warm and rich, without being brash or grating. Much of this comes from the mid-range strengths of the T5 and B5s, which ensures soundtracks come across as full-bodied, rather than simply a mix of highs and lows.

Avatar on Blu-ray offers demo-worthy audio, so that's what I started with, and the Image array is more than a match for the impressive visuals. James Horner's somewhat irritating score swells across the front soundstage, while the Screenwriting 101 dialogue comes across crisp and clean in the middle of the mix. The C5 centre may present a bit of an installation problem in some smaller systems, but its performance merits it.

As with the more costly Imagine lineup, it's perhaps the tweeters that grab your attention most here. These techtastic titanium domes spit out high-frequency effects (so important >

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HOME CINEMA Choice ★★★★ BEST BUY

The design and build of PSB's Image speakers is hard to fault

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Specifications

T5 floorstander

Drive Units: 1 x 1in Titanium dome tweeter with Ferrofluid Neodymium magnet; 2 x 5.25in clay/ceramic filled polypropylene cone woofers
Enclosure: Ported
Frequency Response: 35Hz-23kHz
Sensitivity: 90dB
Power Handling: 200W
Dimensions: 214(w) x 936(h) x 325(d) mm
Weight: 16.6kg

T6 bookshelf

Drive Units: 1 x 1in Titanium dome tweeter with Ferrofluid Neodymium magnet; 1 x 5.25in clay/ceramic filled polypropylene cone woofer
Enclosure: Ported
Frequency Response: 50Hz-23kHz
Sensitivity: 89dB
Power Handling: 150W
Dimensions: 181(w) x 318(h) x 242(d)mm
Weight: 5.1kg

C5 centre

Drive Units: 1 x 1in Titanium dome tweeter with Ferrofluid Neodymium magnet; 2 x 5.25in clay/ceramic filled polypropylene cone woofers
Enclosure: Ported
Frequency Response: 50Hz-23kHz
Sensitivity: 90dB
Power Handling: 150W
Dimensions: 495(w) x 181(h) x 265(d)mm
Weight: 8.7kg

SubSeries 5i subwoofer

Drive Unit: 10in polypropylene cone
Enclosure: Ported
Frequency Response: 30Hz-150Hz
On board power: 150W
Dimensions: 314(w) x 441(h) x 403(d)mm
Weight: 15.9kg
Connections: Line level phono inputs; speaker level inputs and outputs

Sing star: These titanium tweeters work wonders with high frequencies

in movie mixes) with speed and relish. When Sully and Grace land on Pandora and explore the wildlife, the buzzing of the forest insects is insistent and tactile. The same applies to when the Na'vi attack their invaders' helicopters with bows and arrows. With the same tweeters lurking in the bookshelf speakers, surround-channel effects are delicious, too, and the B5's certainly have enough weight to ensure front-to-back pans don't fizzle out.

The enveloping nature of this Image system is aided by the subwoofer. It underpins the whole array with a tangible low-end presence and goes surprisingly deep. It could, however, be a little tighter in its delivery.

With just the front left and rights in use with stereo music, the lack of real low frequency punch in the T5s becomes more apparent. I'd never not use my subwoofer, though, and I suspect even dedicated hi-fi-hedz will still th

the T5s more than adequate, thanks to the richness of the overall sound. The tweeters that excelled so well with the ambient sounds on Cameron's Pandora do the same for the intricate hi-hats on Megadeth's *Rust In Peace*. Then, with the AVR switched to Full Channel Stereo mode (my preferred weapon of choice with two-channel tunes), all six cabinets come to life to create musical mayhem, and keep their poise even with the volume raised to neighbour-bothering levels.

System with a smile

For the money, it's hard to find much fault with PSB's new entry-level array. Yes, the subwoofer could be a touch more agile and the towers don't plumb the depths, but the design, build quality and overall performance easily put a smile on my face. Anyone ready to step up from a sub/sat system to floorstanders should track a set down and have a demo



HCC VERDICT

PSB Image 5.1
£1,500 Approx

Highs: Design and build; full-bodied sound with crisp high frequencies; value for money
Lows: Stereo music misses the sub's low-end grunt; grilles feel a bit cheap

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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56 SIM2 LUMIS 3D-S ➜ Approx £30,000 ➜ www.sim2.com

➜ Specifications

3D: *YES* Active Shutter
Full HD: *YES* 1080p24
Component video: *YES* 1
HDMI: *YES* 2 x v1.4 PC input: *YES* D-Sub
12V trigger: *YES* x 3
Resolution: 1920 x 1080
Brightness (claimed): 3000 Lumens
Contrast ratio (claimed): N/A
Dimensions (max): 458(w) x 210(h) x 455(d)mm
Weight: 11kg
Other features: Triple Flash technology; 280W dimmable lamp; three-chip DLP system; 0.95in chipsets; RS-232C and USB control options; external 3D Sync transmitter; Live Colour Calibration 2 software; ALPHAPATH technology; PureMotion processing; available in four colour options; two pairs of glasses included



HOME CINEMA Choice *Reference Status*

Like an Aston Martin, SIM2's Lumis 3D-S is curvaceous and exclusive

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Ambassador of 3D, you truly spoil us

SIM2's latest three-chip DLP projector is a watershed moment in home cinema 3D's fortunes, reckons **John Archer**



Despite the AV industry's best efforts, it seems the public's interest in domestic 3D may be waning. Indeed, it feels as if the format needs a 'booster shot' from some landmark film or product, to re-ignite public enthusiasm. SIM2's Lumis 3D-S could be just the product for the job – except that it costs just shy of £30,000, or a bit more if you go for one of its longer-throw lens options. In fact, it's about as mass-market as a Bentley Continental. So, for most people, excitement will be limited to 'wow, look at what 3D can do', rather than it being a product they can buy for themselves.

Wow factor

But just the fact that the Lumis 3D-S can elicit 'wows' at all is enough to keep the 3D flag flying.

For a start, it looks drop-dead gorgeous, with more curves than a 1966 Raquel Welch and in all the right places, too. Plus, it's beautifully finished and can be bought in any of four striking colours: the standard high-gloss gun metal grey (which is what our sample came in), or white, black or red.

AV/CV

PRODUCT: The first high-end 3D Triple Flash-based projector seen on the home AV scene

POSITION: In the middle of the upper half of SIM2's projector range

PEERS: Nothing we've tested so far comes close

Since you won't be expected to install a £30,000 projector yourself, your installer will thrill to this machine's set-up flexibility. At the heart of its almost infinite tweakability is SIM2's Live Colours Calibration 2 software, which works in tandem with a colour meter to enable your lackey to get the Lumis 3D-S' colour palette looking essentially perfect.

The Lumis 3D-S' main 'wow'-inducing talent, though, is its picture quality, and its 3D pictures are far and away the best I've seen outside of a top-end commercial cinema.

A number of key factors contribute to this projector's near-perfect 3D images. Most significantly, its full HD, active 3D pictures don't suffer at all from crosstalk noise. This double ghosting phenomenon has plagued all previous 3D displays to date to a greater or lesser extent. But with the Lumis 3D-S I didn't find a single crosstalk ghost – and believe me, I spent quite a lot of time looking.

The Golden Gate Bridge sequence in *Monsters Vs Aliens* has become a classic crosstalk test scene, but every strut and cable of the bridge was reproduced by the Lumis 3D-S immaculately. So what does the 3D-S do differently compared to all of its 3D display rivals?

The answer glories under the name of Triple Flash. This system, previously only used in commercial cinema installations, 'flashes' each frame of a 24p alternate-frame, full HD Blu-ray picture into the appropriate eye three times, giving each orb a 72Hz effect and producing a 144Hz overall 3D image. Doing this, claims SIM2, ensures there can't be any of the 'leakage' of one eye's picture information into the other eye, the problem that causes crosstalk.

Colour option: White, black and red finishes are also available

Triple strength

That's not the only massive 3D performance boost Triple Flash technology delivers, either, as the 144Hz overall refresh rate also takes images beyond the point at which your eyes can perceive the 'flickering' that's so commonplace on other active 3D displays.

Removing these two flaws instantly has a beneficial impact on 3D viewing, especially when you're talking about images measuring up to 300 inches across. **It's as if active 3D technology has finally and suddenly snapped into focus.**

The fact that the 3D-S is considered capable of driving 300in screens points to another huge weapon in its high-end arsenal: its exceptional brightness. A dimmable 280W lamp serves up brightness as high as 3000 ANSI Lumens, which pretty much combats the inevitable dimming effect of SIM2's active shutter 3D glasses (two of which are bundled).

As for other aspects of its picture quality, the 3D-S' colours during 3D viewing are the most natural I've seen on a 3D display, handling even the quite difficult and diverse tones >

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Full array: A brace of HDMIs on the rear join component and PC inputs

of *Tron* in 3D with total accuracy. What's particularly brilliant about this is that your installer won't even have to calibrate the 3D-S' 3D hues separately, for SIM2 has already measured the colour properties of the glasses so that its calibration system can simply apply the correct offset values to your 2D colour settings when the projector is switched to 3D mode.

Yet another brilliant aspect of the 3D-S' colour performance finds 2D and 3D images suffering no colour noise. The single biggest reason for this (and another justifier of the 3D-S' price) is its use of three 0.95in DLP chipsets, one each for the red, green and blue colour elements. This removes the need for the colour wheel used by single-chip DLP projectors, so you don't get issues related to colour wheels such as fizzing noise and the rainbow effect.

In the 'normal' projection world, a brightness level as high as the 3D-S' 3000 ANSI Lumens would raise concerns about its contrast potential. But it's quickly clear – particularly when watching 2D – that this video-chucker's **black level response is superb, combining deep blacks with punchy whites and colours within a single frame**. Also striking is how naturally this excellent contrast range is achieved; there's no need to use a dynamic iris, so there's no brightness instability and shadow detail reproduction is outstanding.

It's not just detail in dark areas that impresses on the Lumis 3D-S though. Its detail reproduction with both 2D and 3D HD sources generally is nothing short of mesmerizing, providing an awesome reminder of why full HD 3D was invented.

Completing the conversion of your home into a movie theatre is the Lumis 3D-S' motion handling, which is crisp and effortlessly natural. SIM2 has built some motion processing into its latest projector, including a mode specifically designed for 3D. But while this did improve the look of one or two sports-based sources, for the most part I'd recommend leaving it turned off.

Hard to fault

Try as I might, I'm really struggling to come up with anything bad to say about the Lumis 3D-S. Its remote control is rather rubbish – although owners will likely ditch it in favour of a wider-ranging home entertainment controller anyway. It also runs a touch noisily, especially when you're watching 3D. But again, a good installer should be able to work around this.

In other words, my efforts to moan about the Lumis 3D-S have proved pathetically ineffectual. Which is just fine by me, actually. I really don't want anything to undermine the main point about the Lumis 3D-S, which is that as well as being a typically sensational SIM2 2D performer, it's far and away the finest 3D display I've seen.

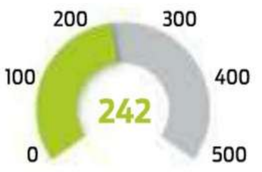
So much so that it won't fail to persuade even the most hardcore of 3D sceptics that the format is more than just another gimmick.

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: With our 100IRE full white display, the SIM2 drew 241W



Test footage: The projector's lamp doesn't vary its brightness, regardless of content, hence the near-identical figure

TV Contrast: Ratio



Picture: A post-calibration contrast measurement of 65,000:1, with a luminance of 17.9fL, is very impressive

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets: The complex colour management system allows calibration to 6,500K. Of the various presets, we measured D65 in Native mode at 6,700K



HCC VERDICT

SIM2 Lumis 3D-S
£30,000 Approx

Highs: Near perfect 3D pictures; beautifully designed; flexible setup
Lows: Unimpressive remote; a bit noisy; cost

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

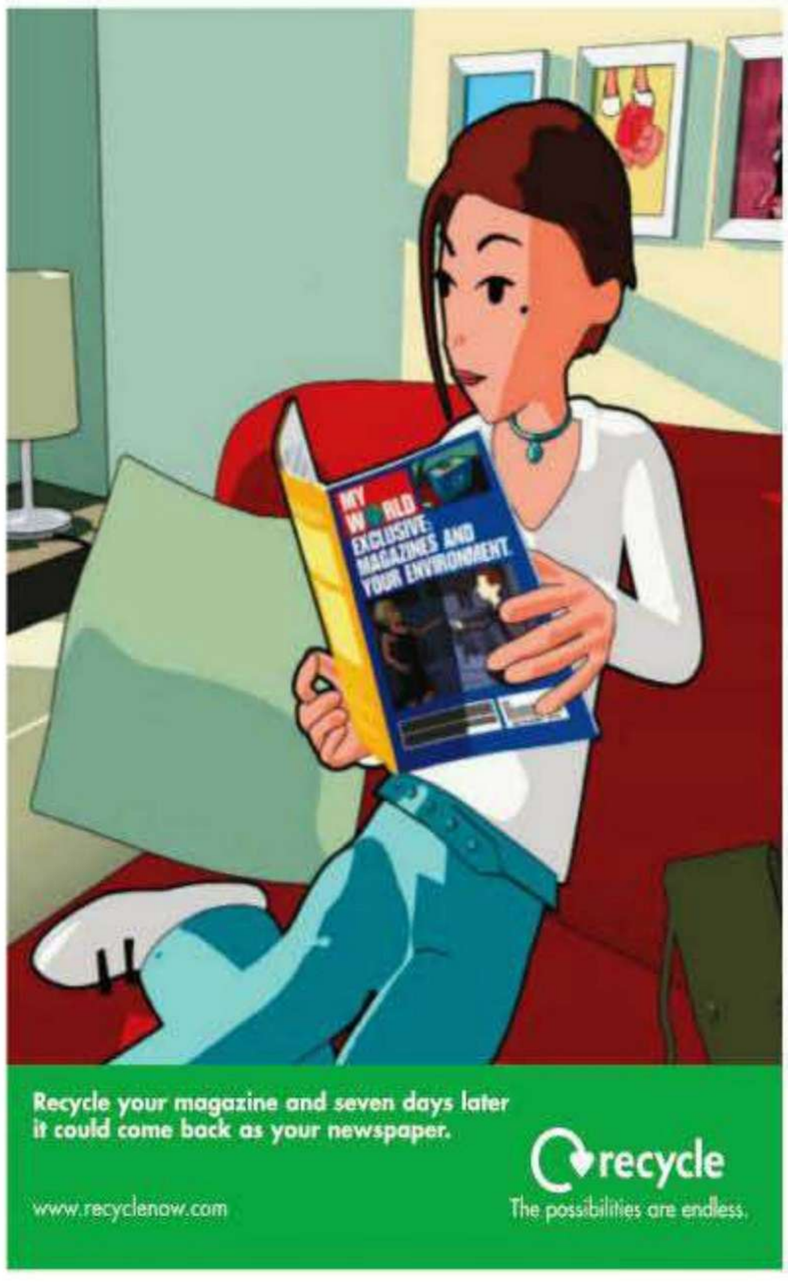
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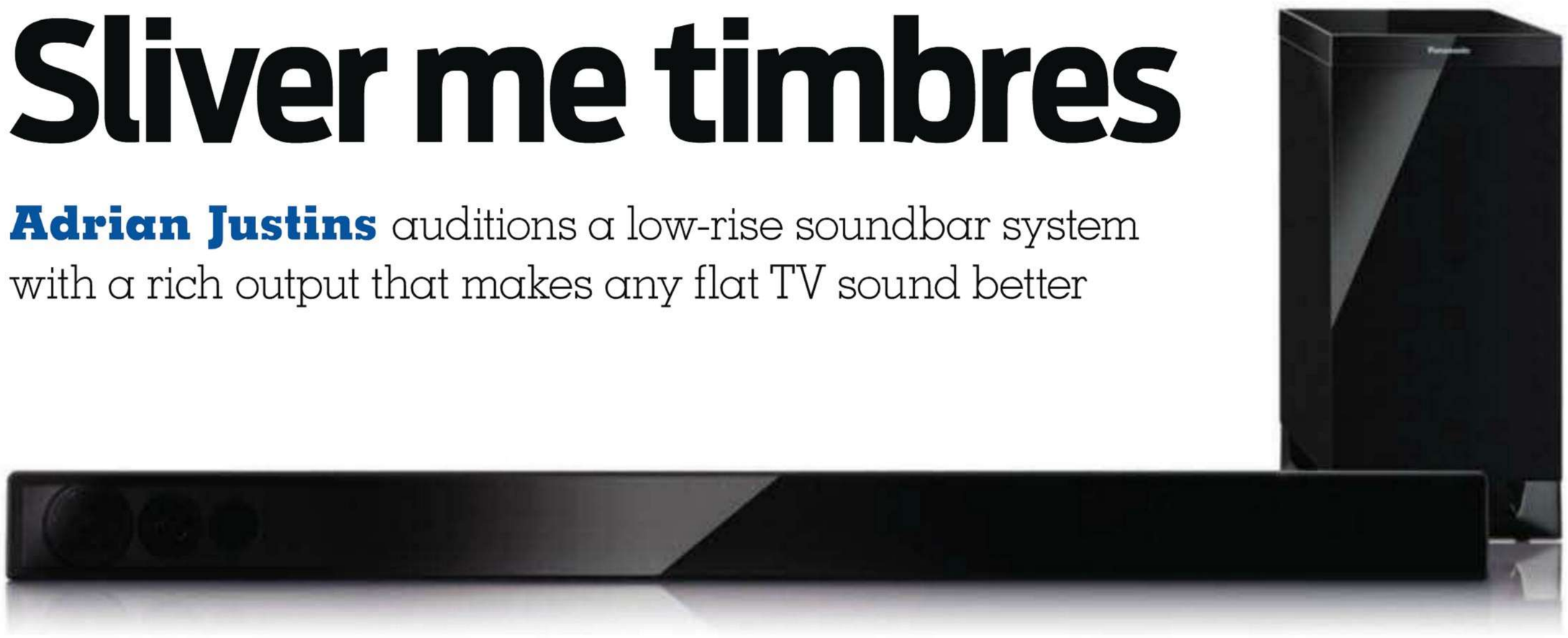
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Sliver me timbres

Adrian Justins auditions a low-rise soundbar system with a rich output that makes any flat TV sound better



Pick-a-stick: At over a metre wide, the SC-HTB520 soundbar is a candidate for wall mounting

The majority of TV screens are sold on the basis of their picture quality and how thin they are, so until somebody manages to make slim speakers with as much sonic clout as the traditionally lumpy woofers and tweeters, there's a need for devices such as this one.

Some soundbars block your TV's remote control sensor and worse, encroach into your field of vision. The SC-HTB520's sheer presence will spoil the immaculate appearance of your TV on its stand, but with a Hobbit-esque height of less than 8cm it shouldn't affect viewing. Should it need to, it can also pass on commands from your TV's remote control to the screen via an IR blaster.

A much more elegant solution is to mount both screen and bar on a wall, and the SC-HTB520 is supplied with two brackets for this purpose.

Nest-sized

The 120W gloss black subwoofer is as attractive as these things get, plus it can be squirreled away out of sight behind the sofa, thanks to its wi-fi connection to the main unit.

The straightforward two-way, two-speaker, bass reflex layout of the main unit is faintly visible behind the non-removable grille that covers the entire front. With no LCD display to use, trying to balance the subwoofer and main unit's separate volume controls proves to be a bit of a lark.

The SC-HTB520 isn't interested in anything analogue, wearing its digital stripes with pride. With two v1.4 HDMIs and a digital optical audio input, the idea is that you route sound and picture from a Blu-ray or DVD deck to the HDMI input and optically connect from your screen's digital output. The HDMI output then p[illegible]s the video signal to your screen, but this socket can also receive your TV's sound output if the latter has an audio return channel (ARC) HDMI. This also frees up the digital optical socket for use with Dolby Digital signals from a console, Sky HD or Virgin Media TiVo box.

Curiously, every time I switched the unit on it defaulted to the TV input within five seconds, even without an ARC feed or an optical cable connection and I manually had to reselect the HDMI input.

An onboard decoder is equipped to handle DTS and Dolby Digital signals, which are output as pseudo-surround Dolby Virtual Speaker and the unit can accept up to 7.1-ch linear PCM. Operating the system couldn't be easier; you simply select the source and adjust the volume levels of both units.

Dialogue in particular really stands out. With the *Monsters Vs Aliens* Blu-ray wedding scene, the dialogue between Derek and Susan is crystal clear. On a more subtle level you can even make out the rustle of her veil at the altar, and as the church falls apart you feel the creaking wood and impact of the tower as it smashes on the ground. All in all, everything feels nicely controlled.

However, other sources reveal how bass-heavy the main unit is. With the sub turned right down, the double bass of *The Wire*'s theme tune vibrates uncomfortably, while MTV Eminem's *Lose Yourself* has too much thud. Despite this, vocals always shine through and the overall effect is certainly positive.

While you can't crank things up high and the so-called pseudo surround is not even pretending, the general improvement over any TV's speakers is immeasurable.

→ Specifications

Panasonic SC-HTB520

Drive units: 2 x 2.5in cone-type woofer; 2 x 1in semi-dome type tweeter x2; 1 x 6.25in downward-firing bass driver
Power output (claimed): 240W (120 subwoofer, 2 x 60W soundbar)
Connections: HDMI in, HDMI out, digital optical audio in, IR blaster terminal, wi-fi connector (for sub)
Dimensions (w/o stand): 1018(w) x 75(h) x 44(d)mm
Weight (w/o stand): 2.5kg
Features: Up to 7.1-ch linear PCM via HDMI; Dolby Digital/DTS compatible; DPL II/Dolby Virtual speaker; clear mode dialogue; ARC; Viera Link; wall-mountable brackets; auto lip sync; credit-card sized remote control

AV/CV

PRODUCT: 2.1-channel soundbar with wireless active subwoofer

POSITION: Top dog over two other soundbars

PEERS: Boston Acoustics TVee Model 25; Orbitsound T12; Pioneer HTP-SB300



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic SC-HTB520
£300 Approx

Highs: Designed to complement most screens; easy to use
Lows: Lack of visual info; bass heavy main unit; autoselects TV input

Performance: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

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LENCO SB-100 → £140 APPROX → www.lenco.eu

Analogue audio alchemy

An affordable soundbar has **Adrian Justins** surrounded



The SB-100 claims to deliver a 5.1 experience through the magic of its so-called 3D sound feature, despite not being equipped with digital inputs or any kind of surround sound decoding. The only sockets are one set of stereo phonos and dual 3.5mm line inputs. Analogue signals are processed by circuitry licensed from Sonic Emotion and delivered to your ears via the SB100's room-filling multiple drive units. There are six full-range tweeters and a 20W subwoofer that offer a combined 80W of power output, which is four times as powerful as most TV screens' built-in speakers.

Tweet treat: A combined 80W of output is far more powerful than most TV's sonics

Highs

- The 3D effect really does create an enveloping sound. When listening to classical music it's as if half the orchestra has gone home when you disengage 3D.
- With action-packed Blu-ray movies such as *300* dialogue is clear and strong, while individual effects have terrific impact compared with a TV's own speakers.

Lows

- The overall sound feels artificial with a metallic edge to mid frequency sounds.
- The 3D mode is not suitable for speech, which sounds lispy. Reserve the room-filling 3D mode for rich, multi-layered soundtracks.
- The SB-100 has no hope of physically squeezing into the gap between the bottom of your screen and TV stand and the company's website shows the bar itself being used as a stand. That's not an option for pedestals with a larger footprint than the soundbar's own (540mm wide x 165mm deep x 110mm high), so placing the bar could be awkward.

HCC VERDICT

Lenco SB-100
£140 Approx

Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

TRITTON AX PRO DOLBY 5.1 HEADPHONES → £150 APPROX → www.madcatz.com/entertainment.toshiba.co.uk

Real-deal multichannel cans

Genuine 5.1 from any Dolby Digital source? **Steve May** plugs in

These surround sound headphones ship with their own Dolby Digital 5.1 decoder module and employ a quartet of dedicated channel drivers in each ear cup. Peel away one of the felt pads and you'll uncover a pair of 30mm drivers, one for the front left/right and the other for a surround channel, plus a 23mm driver for the centre and a large 40mm driver to handle the .1 LFE.

Highs

- The system is compatible with any surround sound source. Run an optical lead from your chosen component into the AX pro DD5.1 decoder; this then feeds the speaker drivers via a 4m cable.
- The AX Pro headphones are well built and substantial, with firm padded cups and head rail.
- The resulting surround experience is undeniably authentic. Dialogue is anchored mid-forehead while panned effects encircle your skull. Aggressive surround mixes are surprisingly intense. The volume level of each individual channel is controlled by a lit in-line adjuster.
- At their best with games. In-game Dolby Digital processing dynamically steers audio effects based on what you're doing in the game.
- The AX Pro headphones offer immersive multichannel sound. There's a sense of purpose to their sound steerage which replicates a multi-speaker sound system.
- The cans can be used with a Blu-ray/DVD player, Sky box etc or games console (Xbox 360, PS3).

Lows

- While steerage is convincing, the sonic quality of the headphones is less so. Their timbre is more brutal than musical. Not for latenight classical listening.
- While well built, the weight of the headphones becomes onerous after a while.



HCC VERDICT

Tritton AX Pro Dolby 5.1 headphones
£150 Approx

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

In Brief

Cars 2 (Xbox 360)
Disney, £40 Approx



While never reaching the dizzying heights of *Split Second* or the *Burnout* franchise, this movie tie-in racing game is still worthy of petrolheads' attention – even if the cars do look cutesy. The action is frantic and enjoyable, and there's lots of gameplay to be had in career mode

1 2 **3** 4 5

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62 SAMSUNG TA950 27→£650 Approx→www.samsung.co.uk

Do-it-all screen for 3D film fans

Steve May checks out a mini version of Samsung's high-end LED TVs

Samsung's Series 9 TA950 drew big crowds when it was first unveiled at the 2011 CES. A hybrid 32in Freeview HD 3D TV and PC monitor, it's a leading-edge screen for your desktop that offers all the functions of the brand's high-end LED TVs. The design is inspired, with a panel that's effectively suspended above its pedestal via a swooping right-hand bracket. This tilts backwards for a relaxed viewing position. Slimline 7W stereo speakers fire forwards from the front of the super-thin pedestal, while inputs are ranged along the rear. Just as on the brand's regular TVs, the TA950 sports Samsung's Smart Hub apps and IPTV portal, home to the BBC iPlayer YouTube, LOVEFiLM and the new and exclusive Explore 3D content channel.

Highs

- The LED backlighting, which runs up the left and right sides of the panel, is very even – a benefit of the smallish screen size.
- A sub-32in screen may seem inappropriate for 3D, but the fact that you'll be sitting close to the monitor contributes greatly to the sense of immersion.
- The smaller screen size also helps minimise crosstalk.
- One pair of 3D spex is included.

Lows

- Wi-fi isn't integrated; you'll need to use a Samsung dongle.
- Despite offering S-RGB, there is no dedicated card slot to view your digital snaps directly.
- The significance of the Smart Hub IPTV portal is reduced. As a monitor, all this content will be accessible via your connected PC anyway. The screen can also stream media across your network, although this function is also likely to be bettered by a connected PC.



Hang a right: The fully adjustable bracket makes for relaxed viewing

HCC VERDICT
Samsung Series 9 TA950 27
£650 Approx
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

SONY BDP-S380→£130 APPROX→www.sony.co.uk

A Sony for the boracic lint

Danny Phillips advises potential buyers to find another £20

Sony's bottom-of-the-range Blu-ray spinner offers a lot in performance and specifications for its meagre £130 ticket, but misses out on a couple of the key features that its BDP-S480 sibling brings to the party for only £20 more. With that in mind, it's only worth considering if you're really hard up, or are looking to upgrade your bedroom setup.

Highs

- Sony's brilliant web portal, Bravia Internet Video, still boasts the best range of content around, including BBC iPlayer, Demand Five, Sky News, Eurosport, LOVEFiLM, YouTube, and much more. Yes, there's no app gallery full of child-friendly games, but do you care?
- Despite being Sony's entry-level player, it still features the brand's Xross Media Bar menu, which is as intuitive as ever.
- There are two USB ports on board, one on the front for media playback from storage devices and one on the back to house the optional UWA-BR100 wireless LAN adaptor, which you can find online for around £50.
- Other features include smartphone control, the Gracenote-powered Entertainment Database Browser and picture presets for different lighting conditions.
- Hi-def picture quality is excellent, with crisp detail and natural colours. And, like the rest of Sony's player lineup, the BDP-S380 can spin Super Audio CDs.
- Disc loading and boot-up times are fast, and it feels well made for a budget deck, despite being almost comically slimline.

Lows

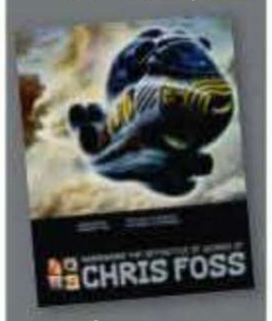
- You can't stream content over a home network and there's no 3D support – two features which you can enjoy on the £150 BDP-S480.
- The S380 won't play DivX files, which seems odd in this day and age. It didn't get on with my hi-def AVI and WMV files, either.



HCC VERDICT
Sony BDP-S380
£130 Approx
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

In Brief

Chris Foss: Hardware
Titan Books, £25



The greatest works of sci-fi illustrator Chris Foss have been compiled into this colourful tome. Foss designed for *Alien*, *Superman* and *Dune* (and was ripped off by *Star Wars*), but it's his hugely detailed, imaginative paperback cover paintings of giant starships and robots that will really blow your mind.

1 2 3 4 5

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PANASONIC DMP-BDT310 **3D BLU-RAY PLAYER**
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ALSO AVAILABLE: DMP-BDT110 & DMP-BDT210



PIONEER BDP-LX54 **3D BLU-RAY PLAYER**
The BDP-LX54 3D Blu-ray player features playback support for the new 3D Blu-ray Discs that bring an exciting new dimension to movies when connected to a 3D-capable display via HDMI.



SAMSUNG BD-D6900 **3D BLU-RAY PLAYER**
This ultra slim 3D Blu-ray player features wireless networking plus a Freeview HD tuner for recording to an external HDD.
ALSO AVAILABLE: SAMSUNG BD-D5500 & BD-D7000



SONY BDP-S780 **3D BLU-RAY PLAYER**
New 3D Blu-ray disc player which also supports multimedia content from the Internet or from a computer.
ALSO AVAILABLE: SONY BDP-S380 & BDP-S580



ARCAM FMJ AVR400 **AV RECEIVER**
The new AVR400 has been developed as a more affordable way to access Arcam's legendary sound quality.
ALSO AVAILABLE: ARCAM FMJ AVR600



DENON AVR-1912 **AV RECEIVER**
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ALSO AVAILABLE: DENON AVR-3312



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PANASONIC

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G30 ..... 42" 50"

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66 TOSHIBA 42RL853 → £600 Approx → www.toshiba.co.uk

→ Specifications

3D: *NO*
Full HD: *YES* 1080p/24
3D: *NO*
Tuner: *YES* Freeview HD, analogue
Component: *YES*
HDMI: *YES* four HDMI
Resolution: 1920 x 1080
Sound: 20W (2 x 10W)
Brightness (claimed): N/A
Contrast ratio (claimed): 1,400:1
Dimensions: 1,000(w) x 620(h) x 40(d)mm
Weight: 11.9kg
Features: Resolution+; Edge-LED backlit; USB for media playback (MP3, AAC, JPEG); net connectivity featuring YouTube, BBC iPlayer & Flickr; Dolby Volume

Movies are presented with cinematic fidelity on this budget-styled screen

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Slim pickings

Toshiba's 42RL853 is tailor-made for the mainstream, says **Steve May**. But that doesn't preclude a few surprises

Earlier this year, Toshiba announced a slew of upmarket 3D-ready TVs. Dressed in togas, and liberally invoking the god Bacchus, the brand's senior executives took over the Italian film set used to make *Rome,* the BBC/HBO co-production, and proclaimed that a legion of advanced tellyboxes brandishing the banner of its new Toshiba Places online portal, would march on the combined rival armies.

Well, that particular legion has yet to materialise and we're still waiting for the doors of Toshiba Places to be flung wide. Meanwhile, it's business as usual on the Tosh telly front, with nothing but meek budget offerings. This 42-incher is one of the latest journeyman shelf-fillers.

At 40mm thin it's in line with higher-end designs from rival screen makers. But its plastic back panel creaks in a distinctly budget fashion and build is very average.

The screen offers four HDMI inputs (one side-mounted), plus, component, stereo phonos, PC input and a digital audio output. There's also a single USB input and Ethernet LAN. There's no integrated wi-fi (unsurprisingly), but you can always buy a dongle if you don't have wired access.

The set does have 'net connection, enabling you to browse your photo library on Flickr, watch catchup TV via BBC iPlayer or browse YouTube. Since the latter are the two biggest IPTV draws anyway, their inclusion may suffice for some. And it must be stressed that the YouTube XL API used here is actually very good. It grants access to 720p HD streams when they're available, which is more than some other brands offer.

The set also lays claim to media streaming. However, in this regard it's largely ineffectual. While the TV will spot PCs and NAS devices on your network, it blanks most file formats.

Video compatibility is limited to MPEG derivations. It ignored all the samples in my test folder with the exception of an MPEG-2 TS clip.

Music playback is more impressive. Over the network, the TV correctly read artist/album metadata from my MP3 music server, although it ignored album art. From USB, the set did play back MP3 and AAC music files.

Picture quality is unremarkable. While there's a surprising amount of parameter control, some key limitations can't be overcome. The screen does not benefit from any high-speed Active Vision motion processing. This caps the perceived motion resolution of the panel at less than 700 lines, resulting in blurry fast motion. Images snap from sharp focus to a smudge.

The fact that there is no fast frame rate processing does at least mean that movies retain their cinematic look. There is some horizontal panning judder, but nothing overly painful.

AV/CV

PRODUCT: Affordable large-screen LED LCD TV

POSITION: Toshiba's RL range sits beneath the brand's SL Smart TV models

PEERS: Sony KDL-40CX523; Panasonic TX-L42E3

Take control: The remote feels balanced in the hand



Plus points

The 42RL853's black level looks good in rooms with moderate ambient lighting, but starts to wash out in a fully darkened room. Colour fidelity is fair. I do like Resolution+, the brand's rather clever edge enhancement and interpolation tech. Images viewed from sofa distance with Resolution+ turned on definitely look sharper and more detailed than with the processor turned off.

When watching Blu-rays, put the screen in its Native Pixel mode so that nothing is lost behind the bezel.

The screen's edge-LED backlight is reasonably good. The set utilises Active backlight control. There's some light blooming in the corners of the screen but it's uniform.

Overall, the 41RL853 can be considered reasonable value and a presentable proposition for penny-pinchers, even if it lacks the sex appeal (and 'net smarts) of Toshiba's incoming elite.

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: Consumption with our 100IRE screen is not as efficient as some of this screen's rivals



Test footage: With movie material, we measured an average draw of 96W

Contrast: ratio



Picture: In our preferred Hollywood 2 preset, contrast measured at a low 340:1 – although Toshiba's own claim is modest. Game mode increases it to 809:1

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets: The two Hollywood modes offer the closest colour temp to 6,500K
Dynamic: 9,700K
Hollywood 1: 6,200K
Hollywood 2: 6,300K
Game: 8,000K

Menu: On Screen



Photo portal: As well as YouTube and BBC iPlayer, the Toshiba features access to Flickr

HCC VERDICT

Toshiba 42RL853
£600

Highs: Resolution+ adds detail to SD sources; BCC iPlayer and YouTube integration

Lows: Poor motion resolution; only streamed MPEGs from our network

Performance: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Sound: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

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Return of the King

The first universal 3D Blu-ray player from Cambridge Audio is something very precious indeed, says **Steve May**

If I were building a Blu-ray player, I suspect it would look a lot like Cambridge Audio's Azur 751BD.

It would be 3D compatible (just in case), offer network media streaming for sound and vision (because frankly that's essential) and it would be compatible with my treasured, but sadly not growing, collection of DVD-Audio and SACDs.

It would also have a facia forged in the fires of Mount Doom. I would call it The One Facia. Sadly, the 751BD rather lets me down on that front. Instead, Cambridge Audio has settled for a rather less eldritch aluminium plate.

In truth, the 751BD is a pretty substantial player all the same. Tipping the scales at 5kg, it's blessed with a rigidity that speaks of refinement and clarity of purpose.

Connections are many and varied, and include dual HDMI outputs. The primary HDMI feeds video to a 3D capable display, while the secondary takes lossless audio to a legacy receiver. If you have a 3D-friendly AVR you may not need to use this second output at all. Although, if you were feeling frivolous, you could feed a second display in another room.

The player isn't wi-fi enabled, but a dongle is supplied in the box should you need it.

Despite its sophistication, the 751BD is easy enough to drive. The menu system reveals shared DNA with the Oppo BDP-95EU, although other aspects of the build are distinctly CA.

One area where it definitely pips the Oppo is file compatibility. Indeed, the player got to grips with almost everything in my test folders, both across the network from a NAS and from local USB. From MP3, AAC and FLAC to AVI, MOV and MKVs, it ruled them all.

In addition to the largely nonsensical BD-Live, the player also has online access to Picasa, which is nothing if not a little random. Hopefully this 'net connectivity will improve over coming months.

When setting up, though, take care not to select PAL as the HDMI output. Instead choose Multi-System. If you don't, there's a good chance some of your Blu-rays will stutter and judder like a drunken Hobbit.

AV/CV

PRODUCT: Audiophile-grade 3D Blu-ray player

POSITION: Pimped sibling to the 2D BDP-651BD player

PEERS: Marantz UD7006; Oppo BDP-95EU

Processing power

A peak beneath the lid reveals some powerful processing. A Marvell QDEO scaler is partnered by a

→ Specifications

3D: *YES*
Upscaling: *YES* to 1080p
Multiregion: *NO* Region B BD/R2 DVD
HDMI: *YES* 2 x v1.4a
Component: *YES* one
Multichannel analogue: *YES* 7.1 phonos
Digital audio: *YES* optical and coaxial digital outputs
SACD/DVD-A: *YES/YES*
Dolby True HD/DTS HD decoding: *YES/YES*
Dolby True HD/DTS HD bitstream: *YES/YES*
Profile 2.0: *YES* Including 1GB storage for BD-Live
Dimensions: 430mm x 85mm x 312mm(W/H/D)
Weight: 5kg
Features: Ethernet; eSATA, 2 x USB; network media streaming; selectable anti-alias filtering; Pure Audio mode; Picasa via internet connection



Cambrdige Audio's deck offers sturdy build and extensive playback options

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Remote: An unexciting grey controller that could do with a backlight



Mediatek MTK8530 decoder, which handles 3D decoding, audio codes and suchlike. They're joined by a 32bit Analog Devices Sharc DSP. This upsamples all decoded material to 192kHz/24-bit, whereupon proprietary code applies jitter suppression and anti-alias filtering to all the analogue outputs.

It's at this point that you can choose your own filtering preference, via Minimum, Linear or Steep options on the front panel. To say the difference here is subtle is an understatement. I convinced myself I preferred Linear and left it at that.

As a 2D/3D Blu-ray player the 751BD is hugely impressive. The Extended edition of *The Lord of the Rings* provides an epic demonstration of BD clarity, which this player revelled in. On *Return of the King*, Chapter 65, *The Black Gate Opens*, **the amount of raw detail and texture extracted from the disc is jaw-dropping. Every nuance from the AVC encode is there to be seen**.

Boot up and disc-loading times are nice and snappy.

DVD deinterlacing and interpolation, courtesy of the QDEO scaler, can be considered well above average. The QDEO doesn't quite ace all the HQV Silicon Optix jaggies tests, although generally speaking upscaled video looks smooth and convincing. The Mediatek-fed second HDMI output is not quite so polished, although there's a surprisingly small gap in performance between the two solutions. Wolfson WM8740 DACs guard each analogue audio ouput. When it comes to audio, the 751BD exhibits outstanding imaging and musicality. The best results are to be had from Super Audio CDs, which can be output either as DSD or PCM. My preferred connection output proved to be multichannel analogue.

Sound investment

Out of the box, the 751BD plays by the rules and is region locked. However, there's anecdotal evidence to suggest that dealers are offering unlocked editions. It's certainly worth making enquiries. Of course, regional restrictions are far less significant for Blu-ray than DVD, because so many titles ship without playback constraints anyway.

Overall, the 751BD should be lauded as a brilliant disc-spinner. With its sturdy build and broad playback options, it's a relevant, powerful performer. While it may lack the net-connected niceties of mass-market machines, it stomps all over them when it comes to sonic finesse. Everyone in the Shire will soon want one



Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts

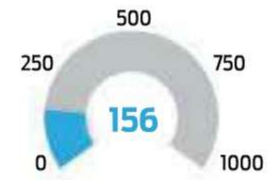


Idling: Just ticking over, the Cambridge Audio deck draws a fair chunk of juice – but it uses less than 1W in standby



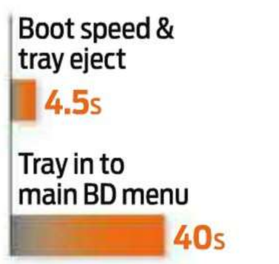
Powered: When playing a disc, consumption increases by 3W

Audio Jitter: ps



Sound: The Azur 751BD's analogue audio jitter figure of 156ps is first-rate

Loading: Boot/Java



Disc loading & Java: No time to make a cup of tea here

Menu: On Screen



Net connection: At present the player connects up to deliver BD-Live features, but only has instant online access to Picasa, which, while useful, may not be everybody's first choice in websites



HCC VERDICT

Cambridge Audio Azur 751BD
£800 Approx

Highs: Excellent hi-def video performance; reference-grade audio; comprehensive media file support

Lows: Lacklustre net-connected content; remote isn't backlit

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Design: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

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70 PANASONIC TX-P65VT30 ➜ £4,500 Approx ➜ www.panasonic.co.uk

➜ Specifications

Full HD: *YES* 1080p24 3D: *YES* Active Shutter
Tuner: *YES*, Freeview HD, Freesat HD Component: *YES*
HDMI: *YES* 4 x v1.4 Resolution: 1920 x 1080
Sound: 22W (2 x 6W + 1 x 10W sub)
Brightness (claimed): N/A Contrast ratio (claimed): 5m:1
Dimensions: 1,570(w) x 956(h) x 60(d) mm
Weight: 56kg
Features: Two Active Shutter glasses are bundled in the box; 600Hz Intelligent Frame Creation; 3 x USB for media playback (JPEG, MP3, AAC, WMA, AVI, AVCHD, MKV support);VIERA Connect Video Portal featuring YouTube, Daily Motion etc; Ethernet connection; VIERA Link CEC; ISFccc mode; THX certification for 2D/3D



The size of a man o' war, the stupendous 65-incher is well worth its high price tag

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Ultimate plasma

Hallelujah! Panasonic has super-sized its high-end NeoPlasma display. **Steve May** basks before the glory of a 65in VT30



Size does matter. Both my wife and the Swedish au pair tell me this constantly, particularly when it comes to our home cinema.

The good news is that others agree. One unexpected side effect from the growing take-up of 3DTVs is that folks are migrating to larger screen sizes. This means a warm welcome should await Panasonic's TX-P65VT30. This 65in iteration of its top-of-the-line NeoPlasma range is a glorious extravagance.

The sheer size obviously poses a challenge. It takes three people to get it out of the box and the 56kg weight means wall-mounting will require some serious planning. It's a good thing then that the supplied pedestal is smart and substantial.

Engorged as it is, the design works well, with the edge-to-edge glass fascia takes on the appearance of a French window.

Connectivity options are standard fare. Wi-fi isn't built in, but Panasonic does include a USB wi-fi adaptor in the box.

Powerful pictures

A screen of this size is completely unforgiving when it comes to visual shortcomings in your sources, but feed it a Blu-ray and it shines. The VT30's picture is both refined and nuanced. Quite aside from the massive amount of fine detail on offer, the screen has extraordinary dynamics with stygian black levels and searing peak whites.

At times I actually began to wonder if the panel, which sports the brand's High Contrast Filter Pro, for improved luminous efficiency, looks too black and contrasty. But of course, there are plenty of parameter controls available to constrain it.

In truth, this is not a difficult set to calibrate; the Normal median is already good, just ease down the sharpness and tweak contrast to taste. It's slightly inconvenient that none of the regular picture parameters have numerical counters; these only appear in the ISF modes.

Alternatively, you could just engage the THX 2D preset – it's well-judged for movie watching.

Not only is the set's regular HD image terrific, but the screen's 3D performance is outstanding. Panasonic has cured traditional double imaging problems with faster phosphors and new Crosstalk Reduction circuitry. The result is a stereoscopic image that's wonderfully convincing; the THX-certified 3D picture has tremendous depth.

Once you clip past 60 inches, 3D at home starts to make quite a lot of sense. The immersion experienced in the cinema is replicated by this massive screen. *Tron:Legacy* (BD) once again feels majestic and those sporadic full-frame sequences, which look kinda odd on a regular telly, suddenly get their old impact back.

Of course, this flagship TV offers other trimmings too. Its media streaming is excellent, with bullet-proof video file support (including MKV), as well as music with album art – when it comes to multimedia integration Panasonic is giving its rivals a lesson. The Viera Connect IPTV portal is well-stocked, too, and Skype functionality is offered.

Be warned that IPTV sources viewed on this scale do look pretty ropey. Panasonic's YouTube client really suffers. It's not that hot at the best of times, settling for SD rather than streaming 720 HD when it's available. Let's hope this limitation is addressed with a firmware update (hopefully to YouTube Lean Back) sooner rather than later.

Overall, though, this is a traffic stopper of a TV. The quality of Panasonic's VT30 panel and the accompanying picture engine isn't diminished by the size of the screen beast. Indeed, if anything it's enhanced, with 3D a spectacular beneficiary. It's almost like having your own personal IMAX

AV/CV

PRODUCT: 3D NeoPlasma with VIERA Connect IPTV

POSITION: Head of Panasonic's consumer plasma fleet. 55-, 50- and 42in models are available

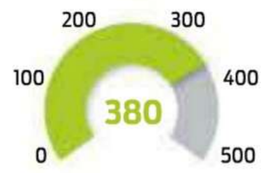
PEERS: Sony KDL-55NX723; Samsung PS63D7000



Remote: Gloss keys and a luxurious red backlight – tarty but nice

Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: An unsurprisingly high power measurement with our 100IRE test



Test footage: With movie material, the average figure is somewhat lower

Contrast: ratio



Picture: Contrast nowhere near the ludicrous claims, but a good post-calibration figure. Luminance measured at 9.5fL

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets: ISF tweaks allow finetuning to 6,500K
Cool: 10,300K
Normal: 7,300K
Warm: 6,000K

Menu: On Screen



Peruse and choose: Panasonic's interface lets you browse your network and attached devices for photo, music and video content

HCC VERDICT

Panasonic TX-O65VT30
£4,600 Approx

Highs: Dazzlingly detailed 2D hi-def, immersive and crosstalk-free 3D; excellent media streaming
Lows: 3D spex not the most comfortable; wi-fi isn't integrated

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

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Multimedia multiplicity

With his never-ending collection of video, music and image files, Martin Pipe puts five multimedia players through their paces



NETGEAR NEOTV 550
£140 Approx
Networkable unit with extensive file support

CRYSTAL ACOUSTICS PICOHD5.1
£50 Approx
Palm-sized player from the speaker manufacturer

IOMEGA SCREEN-PLAY MX TV LINK
£50 Approx
Another dinky device for those on a budget

POPBOX POPBOX 3D
£140 Approx
BBC iPlayer and 3D support catch the eye

XTREAMER IXTREAMER
£150 Approx
Slick looker with integrated iPod/ iPad/iPhone dock

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Media in your pocket

Unstylish but affordable, this tiny media player has a lot going for it

Better known for its range of quality home cinema speakers, Crystal Audio is now tackling the burgeoning multimedia-playback market with a diddy little player that occupies much the same volume as the plug that powers it. Of course, the diminutive size of this solidly-built aluminum enclosure restricts connectivity, although the essentials are there. First and foremost is the HDMI output, which is necessary for hi-def.

The PicoHD5.1 is alas so lightweight that unless it's held down by a heavy object, the weight of the average HDMI cable is enough to displace it. There's also a 3.5mm jack that, by default, supplies composite video and stereo sound to a standard-definition TV. With appropriate configuration, coaxial digital audio is available as an alternative to analogue. High-bitrate soundtracks, such as Dolby TrueHD, aren't supported by the PicoHD5.1, but it worked faultlessly with the Dolby Digital and DTS streams of my test DVD 'rips', though.

This player isn't designed with networks in mind. To get compatible multimedia files into the device, you'll need a USB storage device (HDD or solid-state) or SD/MMC memory-card. The necessary ports live on the miniscule front panel, alongside the infra-red sensor. In keeping with the PicoHD5.1's minimalistic design, the comparatively enormous non-backlit remote whose commands it receives is sprinked with a basic collection of controls.

The main 'transport' ones deal with menu navigation, cue/review and skipping. Annoyingly, the play/pause and stop buttons are tiny. They're located, with the volume up/down keys, under the main group, which isn't necessarily where I'd've put them...

Other buttons are provided for photo zoom/rotate, aspect ratio, AV output mode, subtitles, setup and repeat. They have a pleasant tactile feel, and are accompanied by a metallic 'click' (which can be turned off). A useful home button takes you to the main menu, which includes the basic photo, movies and music categories and an Explore function.



Bigger brother: The remote is larger than the media player...



A handy feature of the PicoHD5.1 is that memory cards and USB devices can be connected simultaneously; when browsing for material, you can choose between the two. A basic contents list is provided, with tiny photo thumbnails. Although its 'no-frills' design won't give the likes of Apple much to worry about, the user interface is responsive. 50Hz and 60Hz video modes are offered, and so conversion judder need not be problematic. A 1080p24 mode is included, too.

Media compatibility is good, all of the key codecs being taken in the PicoHD5.1's stride; of my test media, only FLV (Flash) and M4A audio were denied playback. Video quality is mostly very good, certainly through HDMI; hi-def clips, in particular, stand out.

Subtitles may be supported, but lip-sync is unpredictable – especially with MPEG-2 video – and, unless your AVR provides some means of adjustment, it cannot be corrected. Standard-def upscaling could be improved too; I occasionally noticed 'hooking' with off-air material when the most appropriate 1080p mode was selected.

Music replay, as one might expect from an audio manufacturer, is excellent – especially from FLAC and WAV files. Photo playback is in crisp high-definition, and complemented by an adjustable slide-show mode. A choice of transitions is available, and you can play music in the background while you ogle your snaps.

With its £50 price tag you'd be foolish to expect miracles from Crystal Acoustics palm-sized player, but what you do get is a simple-to-use and well-featured device that could be just what you need.

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Xtreamly appealing

This do-it-all device will certainly find fans amongst the technorati

From one extreme to another; no fewer than thirty-six PicoHD5.1s could fit into the glossily-finished slab that is the Linux-powered iXtreamer.

Most sane people, were they to fit anything, would instead plump for a SATA hard drive. Do so, and you'll have a self-contained media player. It's then just a case of plugging the iXtreamer into any available AV system or TV.

A wide range of connectors is provided for the purpose. In addition to the 1080p24-capable HDMI port are component, composite, stereo analogue and optical/coaxial digital. It's just a pity that you don't get S-video or RGB Scart (even with adaptors) for the best results from standard-def TVs.

Not that the iXtreamer is limited to playback from an on-board hard drive. It can pull compatible content off a network, courtesy of Ethernet (a Wi-Fi USB 'dongle' is optional). Then there are the two 'host-mode' USB ports, for playback of content from external storage. With an optical-drive connected here, the iXtreamer will behave like an upscaling DVD player. A third ('slave-mode') USB port is only of use if you've installed a HDD.

Busy body: The number of buttons reflects the iXtreamer's multitalented nature



This allows the iXtreamer to act as an external drive; files can then be copied to it for playback later. With a HDD, the iXtreamer can itself act as a network server (with uPnP facilities).

And as if all of this wasn't enough, a **top-mounted panel slides back to reveal an iPod/iPad/iPhone dock**. Plug your iThing into here, and AV content can be accessed from the iXtreamer's menus. Some, but not all, Apple products can be charged in situ, too.

Net radio stations are accessible with this unit – a continually evolving Xtreamering portal boosts the online content to include weather, video (YouTube), newsfeeds and other goodies. Note that Xtreamering has to be manually installed firs, and while the download may only be 5MB, it can only be used if an HDD is internally fitted. Ridiculously, you cannot specify USB storage instead. Even without Xtreamering, though, there's plenty this player can do.

The user interface is attractive with its stunning ship-themed background, but fundamentally it's the same sort of text-based list we met on board the PicoHD5.1.

Some of the handset's buttons are dedicated to the iPod. In the middle is a joypad, which is essential for navigating menus and content lists. The menus are reasonably responsive and organised, which is perhaps just as well considering all the facilities on offer. For instance, a comprehensive set of installation menus cover various parameters – audio/video output mode, aspect ratio, photo-slideshow transitions and video adjustments (including noise reduction). However, AV-sync isn't an option, although resyncing subtitles is a handset function.

In terms of multimedia support, the iXtreamer cannot be beaten. It can handle practically anything you can throw in its direction, including Flash video files and Blu-ray/DVD image files. High-definition (and for that matter, regular) multichannel soundtracks can be routed via HDMI to your AVR. Photos are presented in high-def, with selected music. Sound and picture quality, via HDMI and component, is generally strong.

So, aside from my gripes about installing the Xtreamering function, there's little not to love about the iXtreamer. It's a powerful media player, but capable of doing much more than that.



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Black box of tricks

Netgear's NeoTV player offers plenty of features, but some niggles, too



It may not boast all of the 'gadgets' of the iXtreamer, but the NeoTV 550 will still give media moguls plenty to sink their teeth into. It's made by Netgear, a company with a good track record in network equipment (I used its ReadyNAS Ultra 4 as one of our servers during this test).

The NeoTV can be seen as a 'halfway house' between the PicoHD5.1 and iXtreamer in terms of sophistication. It's networkable, although once again you'll have to use Ethernet unless you're prepared to pay extra for a Wi-Fi dongle. Content can also be loaded via the convenient front-mounted USB and SD card slots (which, for all its gadgetry, were conspicuously absent on the iXtreamer).

Rear-panel AV connections are component and HDMI, with an optical digital output thrown in for good measure. Composite video and stereo audio are also available, via a 3.5mm jack (as with the PicoHD5.1, the necessary phono-terminated cable is supplied). RGB and S-video options are ignored, though.

Jostling for space alongside these are an eSATA and additional USB port for storage devices.

The box itself is surprisingly lightweight, and not much to look at. It'll just sit on your rack and look inconspicuous. The handset is one of the better ones supplied with these devices, although once again it's not backlit. However, it's nicely laid out and dedicates buttons to movies, music and photos. On top of this is an on-line content portal that, in contrast to the iXtreamer, doesn't require you to install storage. Amongst other things, you'll find YouTube, Internet radio and Flickr; a shame there's no 4oD or BBC iPlayer, though. During setup, your location is specified; this allows the NeoTV to display a regional weather forecast within the media selection menu.

Once connected, our review unit listed plenty of servers that weren't there. It had obviously been elsewhere. A master reset sorted that out, and I could now see my own folders with the NeoTV's pleasant user interface.

One of the most useful functions of this media player in an AV setup is that **you can arrange for each type of audio to either be 'passed through' as a bitstream, or decoded by the unit itself**. As a result, you can tailor the player to the capabilities of your ancillary equipment. Something else unique is the ability to turn on or off the available network shares individually; some might not, for example, contain any AV content and are thus irrelevant as far as the player is concerned.

Show off: More eye-catching than the player itself



As with the other units, all output resolutions (from 480/576i to 1080p) are available in 50/60Hz – and 1080p24 is supported too. The player can handle all current hi-def soundtracks, which is a boon if Blu-ray content is envisaged. Like the iXtreamer, you can play optical discs if a drive is connected via USB; however, Blu-ray as well as DVDs are catered for. ISO disc 'images' and DVD-derived VIDEO_TS folders will play just like the discs from which they're derived, with menus intact.

Although Netgear claims a considerable amount of format support, I experienced a few occasions where some files could be seen in the content menu – which can be displayed as a thumbnail carousel or a conventional list – but refused to play. These included MKV and TS files.

AV performance, however, proved to be excellent, although the unit's volume control can add distortion if advanced too high, and the photo slideshow seemed a little juddery. Also, I couldn' get it to automatically play the next file in a folder, which makes listening to music something of a chore.

These niggles, combined with its less than stellar design and sizeable price tag, make it not quite the perfect media player it could have been.

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Looking to the future

MKV3D support and BBC iPlayer access are two of this device's key talents

The Popbox network player shares has come from the same school of design as the the Netgear NeoTV 550. It's black, it's rectangular, and kinda ugly. But don't let that put you off.

The rather featureless front panel is equipped with a USB port, although there's no SD card slot. One is available on the rear, but it's not intended to take media from your solid-state camcorder or digital camera. Instead, you're supposed to leave a large-ish card permanently plugged in. This is so the Popbox has space to write a thumbnail-based record of your media library, and to store downloaded applets.

Some of the applets are 'premium' and require registration. Others – among them YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Shoutcast (internet radio) – are both accessible and free. So, too is, – drumroll, please! – BBC iPlayer, complete with HD support.

There's no rear-mounted eSATA port a la Netgear, although the USB port is compatible with external HDDs as well as thumb-drives. Composite video has been dropped entirely; the only output options are component and HDMI.

This goes all the way to 1080p24, but no 50Hz option is listed anywhere. Any UK material is thus spoilt by conversion judder, although this isn't as bad as expected. Stereo audio phonos and an optical digital port are provided for those who don't rely totally on HDMI. Networking is Ethernet, but the Popbox does support optional Wi-Fi adaptors.

The accompanying remote control is a textbook example of how to do things. Clearly influenced by Apple's industrial design, it's backlit and contains the minimum of buttons – but what you do get are laid out sensibly.

Potentially at least, the Popbox is the only product in this grouptes to get even close to the Kaleidescape-style playback experience. The dvice can communicate with the IMDB database, and from there download cover-art and movie information. This cover-art forms the basis of content selection – highlight what you want to view from the carousel grid, and click the enter button.

A similar system is used for music selection, which relies on cover-art already being available. Photos, as one might expect, are represented by thumbnails. Presented in HD, they can be played as a slideshow with or without background music.

Popbox has made much noise about its 3D support, but it doesn't support the 'multiview video coding' of any 3D Blu-rays you might have ripped to an accessible storage device. Instead, it caters for the newish MKV3D standard – and anything carried in a side-by-side or top-bottom 3D format. I'm pretty sure that any HD-compatible media player could deal with those, although users might need to manually-switch their 3DTVs into the most appropriate display mode.

Another cool feature, and one that should be adopted universally, is 'search'. Enter one or more characters of what you're looking for, and all available matches are displayed. Less cool was my inability to get the IMDB-powered video selection system to work, and so I had to rely on the cluttered text alternative. I suspect that the persistent appearance of an annoying 'insert memory card' message, even with said card present, might not be entirely unconnected. Also, some of the networked folders would occasionally disappear completely, necessitating a hardware reset – and even that didn't guarantee their reappearance.

Still, 50Hz-to-60Hz conversion artifacts apart, picture and sound quality are fine and format support is extensive.



No fuss: Neatly designed and backlit – we like!



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Affordable excellence

The Screenplay MX TV Link excels where some more expensive players falter



Finishing off pretty much where I started, Iomega's Screenplay MX TV Link is a device very much in the vein of the PicoHD5.1.

The lightweight aluminum case (with its classy brushed effect) is slightly larger than that of Crystal Acoustics' player, which means that there is now room for phono sockets rather than a 3.5 jack. However, there's no component; all you get are stereo audio, composite video and coaxial digital audio. For best results, and for that matter an ability to take advantage of HD content, you'll need the HDMI port.

No provision has been made for network connections, there's no SD card slot. The only way of getting content into the Screenplay MX is via its front-panel USB port, which supports hard drives and solid-state media. Also on the front panel is a sensor for the supplied handset. Although this is not backlit, its layout is practical enough.

The comparative simplicity of the Screenplay MX TV Link is reflected in its user interface, which consists of a carousel showing the available options in iconic form. Among these 'video', 'music' and 'photo'. Select the one that best describes the nature of the content you want to play and, with the handset's joypad, navigate the various folders of your storage device until the file is found. Rather than the usual text list, you're presented with a grid of icons for audio files and video clips. Photos in the folders are shown as thumbnails. It's pretty zippy, thanks in part to the fact that the content is held on a storage that's directly connected as opposed to being on a network. Pressing the enter button selects the content, and initiates playback.

Elsewhere on the carousel are links to a file browser and the setup menus. Soundtracks can be decoded by the Screenplay MX TV Link itself (i.e. two-channel analogue, or PCM via the HDMI port or digital output), or via the digital outputs in bitstream form. This is essential for DTS, as the unit won't decode such soundtracks. Even in bitstream mode, the sorts of codec that sometimes cannot be handled by an AVR – such as FLAC, MP3 and WMA – are converted into PCM. In other words, you'll get 5.1 when it's needed and no alarming silences at other times. Which is how I like it.

Ronseal remote: Basic, but practical



The HDMI output offers 50Hz and 60Hz modes for all resolutions; as with the other products, these are 576p, 720p, 1080i and 1080p. Sadly, there is no 1080p24 mode for Blu-ray derived video.

Subtitles are supported, as are basic (Winamp-type M3U) playlists. I'm impressed with the photo replay. There's an attractive 'slideshow' function, with or without your choice of music files playing in the background, and you can zoom in and pan around. An ability to rotate pictures, however, is absent.

Considering the modest nature of the Screenplay MX TV Link, the codec support is excellent. Like the others, it can play 1080p MKV video and FLAC audio. However, the Screenplay MX TV Link's ability to handle GIF images and Flash video are denied to some pricier players. AV performance was good, and there were no lip-sync errors.

In all, like its PicoHD5.1 rival, this affordable little player has a surprising amount going for it. But if I had to choose between the two of these £50 devices, I'd plump for the Iomega, as it edges it in pure performance terms.

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Final standings

All of the media players in this grouptest have something to offer. It's good to see that HDMI and HD support are offered across the board – 1080p MKV/x.264 files were not rejected by any of the quintet. Indeed, I was surprised to discover how well different codecs and formats were supported. Not so long ago, for example, MKV/x.264 even at 720p was unknown.

Of course, HDMI is all well and good for connecting to an HD flatscreen TVs, but it's a pity that such short shrift is given to standard-def. None of the players offer S-video or RGB Scart, forcing users with old CRT sets (in a second bedroom, perhaps) to make do with iffy old composite. Maybe manufacturers should consider making the component outputs multifunctional, where, an adaptor cable could provide S-video. If the composite output were to be brought in, too, you would have the four outputs needed for RGB and sync. Just a thought...

Talking of sync, it's a shame that none of the players tested allow you to adjust timing of the video relative to the audio. Some video files I've come across have gaping lip-sync errors, with the result that your film or TV programme can seem like a badly-dubbed foreign movie. Now, although only one of our group, the PicoHD5.1, gave AV sync errors with MPEG-2 files that were known to be good, HDMI was a different ballgame. Even with the HDMI lipsync feature of my Onkyo AVR engaged, all the players yielded errors to some extent. Thankfully, the Onk lets you adjust the delay. But what if your AVR or amp lacks such a feature? It only boosts our case for building one into the player.

As the ability to connect to a network is very useful, that takes the PicoHD5.1 and Iomega models out of the running as far as an outright winner is concerned. Yet the appeal of these affordable devices can't be understated. I'd rank the Iomega

WD – the other guys...

Because it wouldn't be right to do a media player grouptest without mentioning the black boxes from Western Digital



Live & Direct
It's always a delicate point when doing a grouptest whether to mention products which have previously been reviewed in the magazine. They might or might not be as up-to-date as the newer devices in the grouptest, so may still be valid contenders in their market. That's certainly the case with Western Digital, whose media players have consistently been ahead of the pack in innovation, and early on established a reputation for being upgradeable to keep up with technical developments.

WDTV
The original model WDTV was released as far back as 2008. A compact black box with HDMI and USB connections, it did a lot to familiarise users with the concept of the media player. Lacking network support or internal storage, it still offered a convenient way to transfer digital media from PC to TV. A v2 added HDMI 1.3 and support for two-channel DTS, and a number of firmware upgrades followed.

WDTV Mini
The next version, released in 2009, was in a sense a step backwards, in that it didn't feature an HDMI output or support for Dolby Digital or DTS. But it offered 1080i output via component video, and offered excellent value for money, so good on 'em.

WDTV Live
Released in 2009, WDTV featured two-channel DTS, compatibility with wireless USB adaptors, and, most significantly, Ethernet. Internet connectivity included access to Flickr, Facebook and YouTube.

WDTV Live Plus
Released in 2010, the main innovation of WD TV Live Plus was the additional Netflix access – but this worked only in the US market.

WDTV Live Hub
The latest and most advanced WDTV is the Live Hub, which adds an internal 1Tb hard drive to the spec of the Live Plus. It features an HDMI v1.4 output, two USB 2.0 ports, Gigabit Ethernet, and access to a range of websites including YouTube, Flickr, Picasa, Facebook and Live365. The latest update adds a free WD Photos image library app. In the US market, there is also support for video-on-demand services such as Hulu Plus. Reportedly, various models of WDTV have been hacked to add support for external optical drives, BitTorrent downloading, and improved support for thumbnail preview images.

www.wdc.com

1ST



HCC VERDICT

iXtreamer
£150 Approx

Highs: Plenty of features; network support; can be upgraded with internal HDD
Lows: HDD necessary for Xtreamering portal

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

→ Specifications

Video file support: MKV, DIVX, XVID, WMV, FLV, MPEG1, MPEG2, MP4,TS (off-air), VOB (DVD files), ISO (disc image)
Audio file support: MP3, FLAC, WAV, AAC, M4A, WMA, Dolby Digital (analogue decode), Dolby Digital (bitstream), DTS (analogue decode), DTS (bitstream), Dolby TrueHD
Image file support: JPEG, BMP, GIF, PNG
Connections: Component, composite, HDMI, coaxial and optical digital audio, USB, iPod dock
Dimensions: 242(w) x 66(h) x 251(d)mm
Weight: 1kg
Features: DLNA/uPnP support; file-sharing support; screensaver; subtitle support; playlist support; time-search bar; 1080p/24 support; photo slideshow; internet content

2ND



HCC VERDICT

Netgear NeoTV 550
£140 Approx

Highs: Decent remote and connectivity; network, USB and SD-card support
Lows: Some supported files wouldn't play; JPEG slideshow a bit juddery

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

→ Specifications

Video file support: MKV (but not all), DIVX, XVID, WMV, MPEG1, MPEG2, MP4, TS (off-air - not all), VOB (DVD files), ISO (disc image)
Audio file support: MP3, FLAC, WAV, M4A, WMA, Dolby Digital (analogue decode), Dolby Digital (bitstream), DTS (analogue decode), DTS (bitstream), Dolby TrueHD, DTS-HD Master Audio, DTS-HD High Resolution Audio
Image file support: JPEG, BMP, PNG
Connections: Component, composite, HDMI, optical digital audio, USB, eSATA, SD card slot
Dimensions: 220(w) x 35(h) x 145(d)mm
Weight: 0.5kg
Features: DLNA/uPnP support; file-sharing support; screensaver; subtitle support; playlist support; time-search bar; 1080p/24 support; photo slideshow; internet content

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ahead of Crystal Acoustics' PicoHD5.1 – but maybe its forthcoming Media Matchbox, claimed to handle HD audio and Blu-ray, will go one better.

Among the network players the Popbox has some interesting features. It was the only one of our group to support the insanely-popular BBC iPlayer, but was spoilt by bugs and an inability to deal with 50Hz material natively. I liked the Netgear player in many respects, too – its ability to define how different types of soundtrack are handled is a boon for home cinema – but it's not without its flaws.

This leaves the iXtreamer. Sure, it's not perfect, either – areas such as the portal installation and the overly busy handset could be improved, but the features on offer are wide-ranging and highly impressive, it's therefore my winner



The iXtreamer is our pick of the pile

3RD



HCC VERDICT

PopBox
£140 Approx

Highs: Fantastic remote control; glossy user interface (if you can get it to work); apps include BBC iPlayer
Lows: Some bugs; no 50Hz HDMI output; 3D support doesn't cover BD

Performance: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

→Specifications

Video file support: MKV, DIVX, XVID, WMV, MPEG1, MPEG2, MP4, VOB (DVD files)
Audio file support: MP3, FLAC, WAV, AAC, M4A, WMA, Dolby Digital (analogue decode), Dolby Digital (bitstream), DTS (analogue decode), DTS (bitstream), Dolby TrueHD
Image file support: JPEG, BMP, GIF, PNG
Connections: Component, HDMI, optical digital audio, USB, SD card slot (not for content)
Dimensions: 205(w) x 40(h) x 155(d)mm
Weight: 0.5kg
Features: DLNA/uPnP support; file-sharing support; screensaver; subtitle support; playlist support; time-search bar; 1080p/24 support; photo slideshow; internet content

4TH



HCC VERDICT

Iomega Screenplay MX TV Link
£50 Approx

Highs: Excellent codec support; clear menus; simultaneous analogue and HDMI outputs; good AV quality
Lows: No networking; cannot decode DTS – 'passthrough' only

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

→Specifications

Video file support: MKV, DIVX, XVID, WMV, FLV, MPEG1, MPEG2, MP4, TS (off-air), VOB (DVD files), ISO (disc image)
Audio file support: MP3, FLAC, WAV, AAC (not all), M4A, WMA, Dolby Digital (analogue decode), Dolby Digital (bitstream), DTS (bitstream)
Image file support: JPEG, BMP, GIF, PNG
Connections: Composite, HDMI, coaxial digital audio, USB
Dimensions: 105(w) x 20(h) x110(d)mm
Weight: 0.2kg
Features: Screensaver; subtitle support; playlist support; time-search bar; photo slideshow

5TH



HCC VERDICT

Crystal Acoustics PicoHD5.1
£50 Approx

Highs: Small size; no-fuss user interface; excellent codec support; robust audio performance
Lows: Lip-sync problems; no network support

Performance: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5

Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

→Specifications

Video file support: MKV, DIVX, XVID, WMV, MPEG-1, MPEG2, MP4, TS (off-air)
Audio file support: MP3, FLAC, WAV, AAC, WMA, Dolby Digital (analogue decode), Dolby Digital (bitstream), DTS (analogue decode), DTS (bitstream)
Image file support: JPEG, BMP, GIF (not all), PNG
Connections: Composite, HDMI, coaxial digital audio, SD card slot, USB
Dimensions: 65(w) x 15(h) x 75(d)mm
Weight: 60g
Features: Subtitle support; automatically play next track; photo slideshow

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Finishing touches

Adrian Justins trawls the shelves for those must-have home cinema extras



SANUS VMF308

Approx £150

When it comes to wall-mounting a super-slim LED TV the challenge is to find an equally anorexic mount.
This one has a profile measuring just 28mm and features 'Virtual Axis' fingertip-touch tilting.
A cable management guide keeps unsightly wires organised and hidden, while a gliding system lets the screen extend out from the wall with ease and shift left or right on the wall plate. The assembly and mounting is neatly concealed behind a decorative cover.
www.sanus.com

HCC VERDICT

Thin is in, but it's the fingertip control that really stands out

AUDIO PRO WF100

Approx £150



Many of us have music stored on a computer, but haven't worked out how to listen to it elsewhere in our homes. AudioPro's WF100 streams sounds between any USB-enabled computer and any hi-fi with a line-in socket.
The system consists of the TX100 transmitter and mains-powered RX100 receiver. Further receivers can be added for £85 each and a single transmitter can send to any number of receivers within range. Alternatively, three discrete networks can be set up. Audio Pro uses a closed protected dedicated network protocol, and wi-fi reception is protected by an integrated diversity antenna plus a 'sniffer' system, which jumps between free RF channels.
www.audiopro.com

HCC VERDICT

It doesn't get any more 'plug and play' than this.

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ELIPSON MUSIC CENTRE

Approx £1,300

The Music Centre takes a pair of Elipson's acclaimed Planet L speakers and marries them to a distinctive disc-shaped music system with a stylish brushed aluminium finish and an elegant touch-screen front panel. The unit offers CD playback, DAB, DAB+ and FM radio plus a USB dongle for wireless connection to a computer. An optional iPod, iPhone or iPad wi-fi dongle is also available. Further connections include a digital optical input and pre amp, headphone and subwoofer outputs. The system employs a high-end 192 KHz/24 bit DAC and Bang & Olufsen's ICEpower amplification technology to output a substantial 120W per channel.

www.elipson.com

HCC VERDICT

Gallic style comes at a price



SONY S2

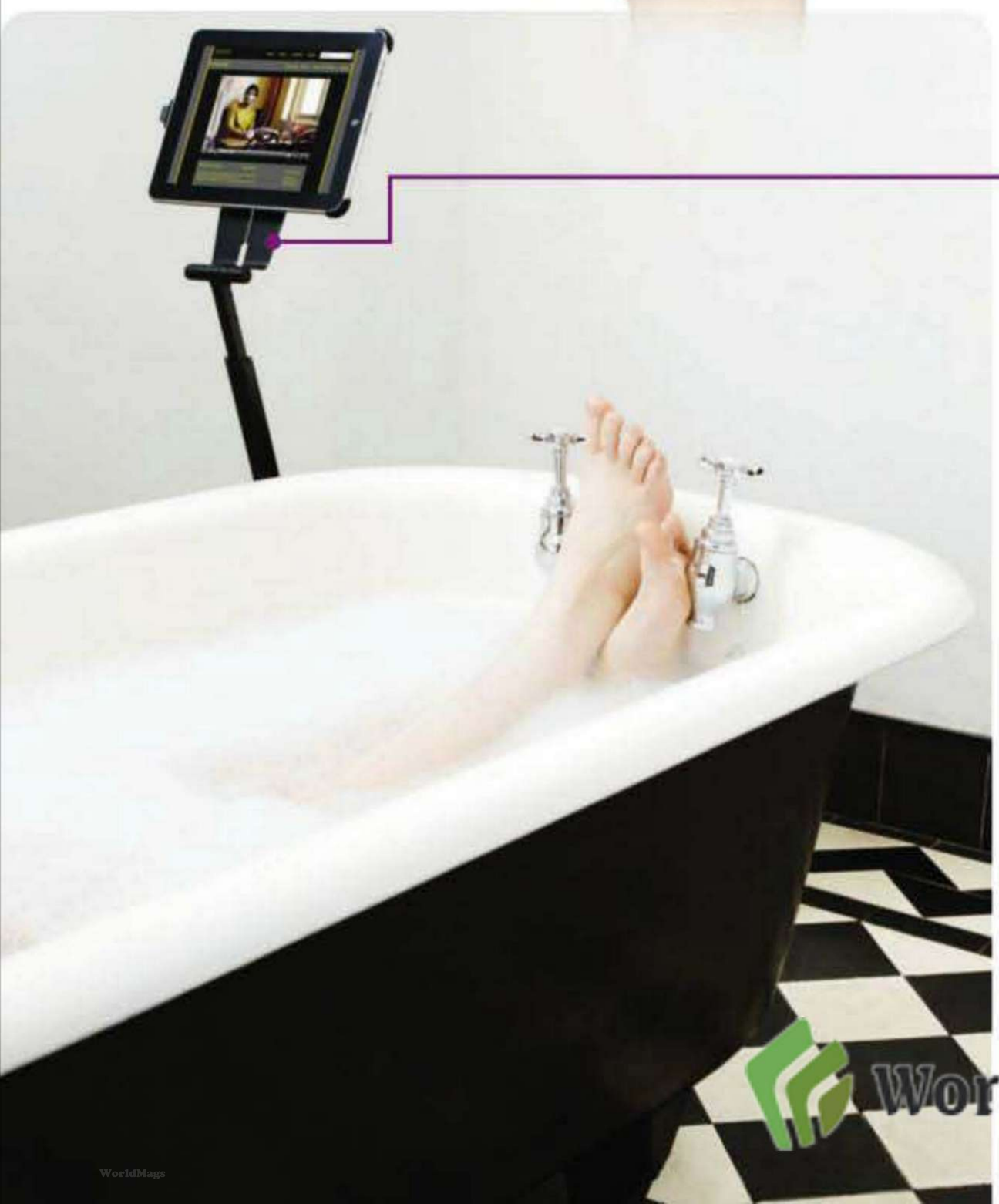
Approx £TBA

Sony is joining the tablet fray in the autumn with the S2, which offers a unique dual-screen configuration. It features two 5.5in displays that enable it to be folded and closed during transit. Its screens can be combined and used as a large (split) screen for different functions. Running on Android 3.0, it will have a new holographic user interface. Other features include access to the cloud-based Qriocity music and video service.

www.sony.co.uk

HCC VERDICT

Is Sony in cloud cuckoo land?



RAT Z3 STAND

Approx £150

There are plenty of tabletop tablet stands, but not many that adapt to any flat surface and offer comfortable viewing at any height between 40cm and 137cm. Based on RAT's wide range of music stands, the Z3 features a telescopic stem and adjustable joint that provides 360º rotation and cradles an iPad (or any other tablet) securely even when watched from below. To avoid clutter and for portability purposes, the stand folds flat in three simple moves. Suggested uses include in the kitchen for following recipes, as a TV screen in bed, as a lectern and as a music stand.

www.ratstands.com

HCC VERDICT

Bath time will never be the same again

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Clips...

Small items that will make a big difference to your system

Lutron Home Control+

£free



Thanks to this new app, it's now possible to operate Lutron's HomeWorks system using an iPad, iPhone or iPod Touch. Smarthome owners can download the app for free from the iTunes App store. www.lutron.com

Sony HD-PG5U



Approx £TBA

Weighing just 180g, Sony's new 500GB hard disk is handy for storing music, picture and movie files on the go. It also sports software that makes it ideal for performing PVR duties when hooked up (by high-speed USB 3.0) to a compatible Bravia TV, and can perform 'PC-less' copying of files direct from certain Sony Handycams. No confirmed price as yet. www.sony.co.uk

Lite-on slim Blu-ray eSEU206



£110 Approx

This USB-powered drive boasts 6x speed BD playback plus DVD and CD authoring. At 21mm high and 350g heavy it's highly portable, and comes bundled with both Cyberlink Power DVD Suite and Lightscribe disc labelling. www.liteonit.eu

Touchscreen Kleen



Approx £6

Supplied with a washable, ultrasoft, microfibre cloth, this grime-loving solvent does a sterling job of keeping your TV or computer screen free of nasty marks. The secret formulation is even environmentally friendly. www.screenkleen.com

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PLAYBACK

→Software highlights **RANGO** Chameleon finds his karma in a truly 'wild' west **ATTACK THE BLOCK** Inner city versus outer space **SOURCE CODE** Time-tinkering sci-fi goes hi-def

→Opinion **FILM FANATIC** The Beek gets nostalgic for old-school film piracy **DOWNLOAD CENTRAL** Why Sky Go hints at a brighter future for video-on-demand **AND MUCH MORE!**

Caribbean Cruz

Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides – Double Play → Walt Disney → Region B BD/R2 DVD

Turn the page to learn if the fourth *Pirates...* film shivers the timbers of our team of expert Blu-ray buccaneers



HCC Ratings key

Captain Blood	1 2 3 4 **5**
Captain Kidd	1 2 3 **4** 5
Captain Hook	1 2 **3** 4 5
Captain Pugwash	1 **2** 3 4 5
Cap'n Crunch	**1** 2 3 4 5

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The new-look Predator costume was bound to upset fans

Setting a predictable course

Plenty of sound and fury signifying not much at all. Has the franchise lost it's way?

→ Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides – Double Play





HCC VERDICT

Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides Double Play → Walt Disney → Region B BD/R2 DVD → £20 Approx

We say: Save your Dubloons

Picture: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Extras: 1 **2** 3 4 5

Movie: 1 **2** 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

While it's a long way from the abject disaster that was *At World's End*, this fourth *Pirates of the Caribbean* flick proves that the franchise still has a long way to go before it can re-capture the spirit of the original film. This mind-numbing 135-minute series of chases, double-crosses and action set pieces casts Depp's Jack Sparrow as the main protagonist but, disappointingly, finds little new for him to do. It simply settles for introducing another convoluted plot and a boatload of new characters for him to bounce off, creating some fun in the form of Penelope Cruz's Angelica and Ian McShane's Blackbeard. But mostly it's instantly forgettable.

Chris Jenkins on picture: This latest *Pirates...* outing can be surprisingly dark and drab at times, so it's a good job that the disc's AVC 2.40:1 1080p is up to the task. The clarity and detailing evident in the hi-def visuals ensures that even the dingiest candle-lit sequences manage to impress in a purely technical sense, and make these parts of the film just as easy to follow as the brightly-lit island exteriors. Speaking of which, when the action shifts to the jungle in Chapters 16 to 18, the encode steps up yet another gear, delivering the most spectacularly verdant greens as part of its impressively rendered colour palette.

Mark Craven on audio: *On Stranger Tides'* DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 [illegible]y from start to finish. Naturally, it's the action set pieces that excel and, thankfully, there's no shortage of those. A particular favourite is the mermaid attack in Chapter 14, which makes excellent use of the surrounds to position you on the boat with the pirates being attacked from all angles. Similarly, the movement of the precariously balanced boat in Chapter 19 makes great play of the full 7.1-channel soundfield, as each tilt of the vessel is accompanied by its cargo falling from right to left and then back again. But even quieter scenes, such as the trek through the marsh in Chapter 21, deliver acoustic thrills, such as a mosquito buzzing around the rear speakers.

Anton van Beek on extras: *On Stranger Tides'* UK Blu-ray offers a surprisingly poor collection of bonus features. The only additional video content here is a three-minute *Bloopers of the Caribbean*, a pair of one-minute *Lego Pirates of the Caribbean: Captain Jack's Brick Tales* animated shorts, plus the ubiquitous *Discover Blu-ray 3D with Timon & Pumbaa* instructional video. And that's the lot. On the plus side, though, all of it is encoded at 1080p.

This leaves director Rob Marshall and executive producer John Deluca's audio commentary as the sole bonus feature to provide any insight into the making of the film itself. Thankfully, there's a fair amount of technical information and anecdotes on offer throughout the track, although a surprising amount is given over to filming in 3D – which seems a bit pointless when you can only watch the 2D version on this release.

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Your Highness: Extended Edition

Entertainment One → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Your tolerance for this raunchy spoof of '80s fantasy films will depend on how much vulgarity you can handle. Personally, I loved it and the impressive Blu-ray package, which offers up both the 102-min theatrical cut and an 'extended and harder' (fnar) 105-min version. The AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode is a real stunner, making the most of the film's gorgeous locations and impressive CGI, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix throws out some surround sound thrills. Generous extras include a commentary, two alternate and six deleted scenes. ***MC***

1 2 3 **4** 5

Faster

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£23 Approx



Pro wrestler-turned-movie-star Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson has returned to his action roots. Prior to stealing *Fast Five* out from under franchise superstar Vin Diesel, he served up some much needed revenge in this action movie throwback. It's a terrific piece of high-octane cinema, and one that's served well by this Blu-ray disc's flawless AVC 2.40:1 1080p visuals and astonishingly powerful (but controlled) DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. My only gripe are the paltry extras: just an alternate ending, five deleted scenes, four animatics and a pair of featurettes. ***AvB***

1 2 3 **4** 5

The Eagle

Universal Pictures → All-region BD/ R2 DVD → £25 Approx

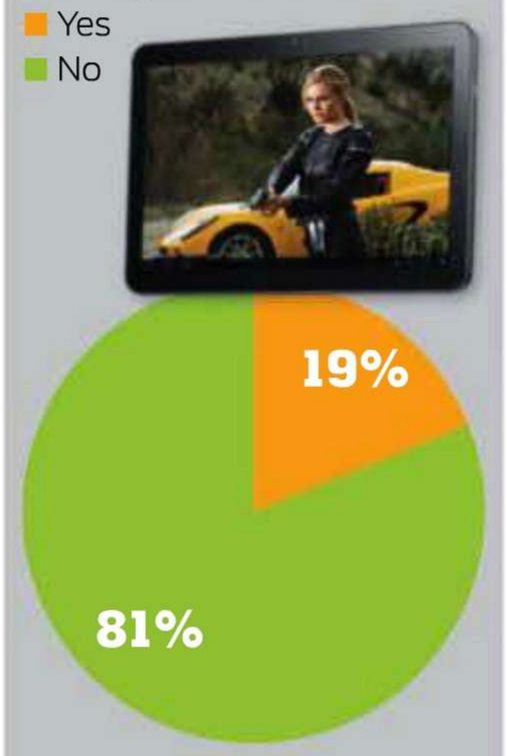


From the novel *The Eagle of the Ninth,* this movie starts well, but proves to be altogether too tame. Compared to Neil Marshall's *Centurion* (which touches on the same historical source), *The Eagle* lacks any blood and grit and just feels like some well-groomed blokes on a jolly adventure in Scotland. The disc's VC-1 2.40:1 1080p encode does a good job with the film's earthy colours and deep shadows, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 adds life to the handful of action scenes. Extras include a commentary, alternate ending, two deleted scenes, a 12-min EPK featurette and a 48-min *Making of...* ***MC***

1 2 **3** 4 5

We asked you...

Do you ever watch movies on a smartphone or tablet?



Results of poll from www.homecinemachoice.com

The Lizard of Oz follows a Blu encode

Colourful critters appeal to a wide audience in this adult satire on the Western genre



→ Rango: Triple Play

There's a world of difference between an 'adult cartoon' and a 'cartoon for adults'. Director/ co-writer Gore Verbinski's *Rango* is a superb example of the latter – a cartoon aimed at an adult audience that will understand its in-jokes and satirical approach to the Western genre, but one that can still be enjoyed by folk of all ages. Playing out like a reworking of *Once Upon a Time in the West,* enacted by anthropomorphised animals, the film's titular would-be gunslinger is voiced by Johnny Depp, as a pampered pet chameleon lost in the wild, whose lies lead to him becoming sheriff of a town called Dirt.



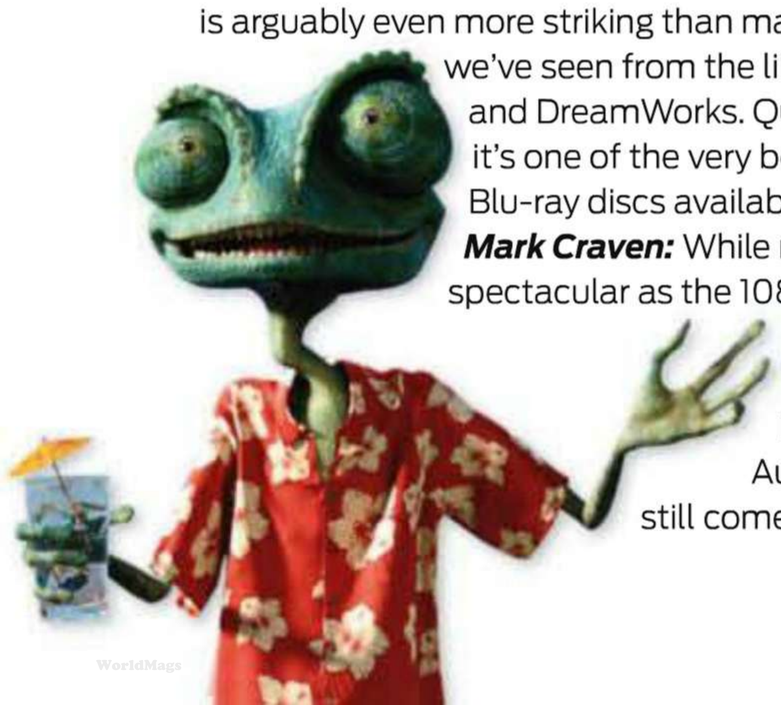
Fear and loathing in a town called Dirt

Chris Jenkins: Unsurprisingly, *Rango* makes quite a splash on Blu-ray. The detailed and richly coloured CG visuals benefit from the disc's technically flawless AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode. Indeed, as *Rango* opts for a much more textured animation style over the more traditionally 'cartoony' visuals employed in the majority of similar films, the quality of the Blu-ray's encode is arguably even more striking than many of those we've seen from the likes of Pixar and DreamWorks. Quite simply, it's one of the very best-looking Blu-ray discs available.

Mark Craven: While not quite as spectacular as the 1080p visuals, *Rango*'s DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 mix still comes pretty close to perfection. As is often the case with animated films, the sound design appears to go overboard to compensate for the fact that every audio element had to be created from scratch. This results in a beautifully nuanced and completely engaging 360° soundfield, with extraordinarily good use of the surrounds and subwoofer throughout the film. The tonal perfection of the mix extends to the superb music presentation and pitch-perfect dialogue.



Anton van Beek: Paramount's Triple Play edition serves up a bonus DVD and Digital Copy of the film alongside a reasonable set of bonus features on the Blu-ray disc (all presented in 1080p). The original 107-min theatrical cut is accompanied by a PiP storyboard reel, and a new 112-min extended cut gets an informative chat track. Also included are a 49-min *Making of...*, ten deleted scenes, an education featurette about the film's critters, the trailer and an interactive map and character guide.



HCC VERDICT

Rango: Triple Play
Paramount → All-region
BD/R2 DVD → £25 Approx

We say: Verbinski's sophisticated toon is a stellar HD experience

Picture: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Sound: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Extras: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Movie: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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Film Fanatic...

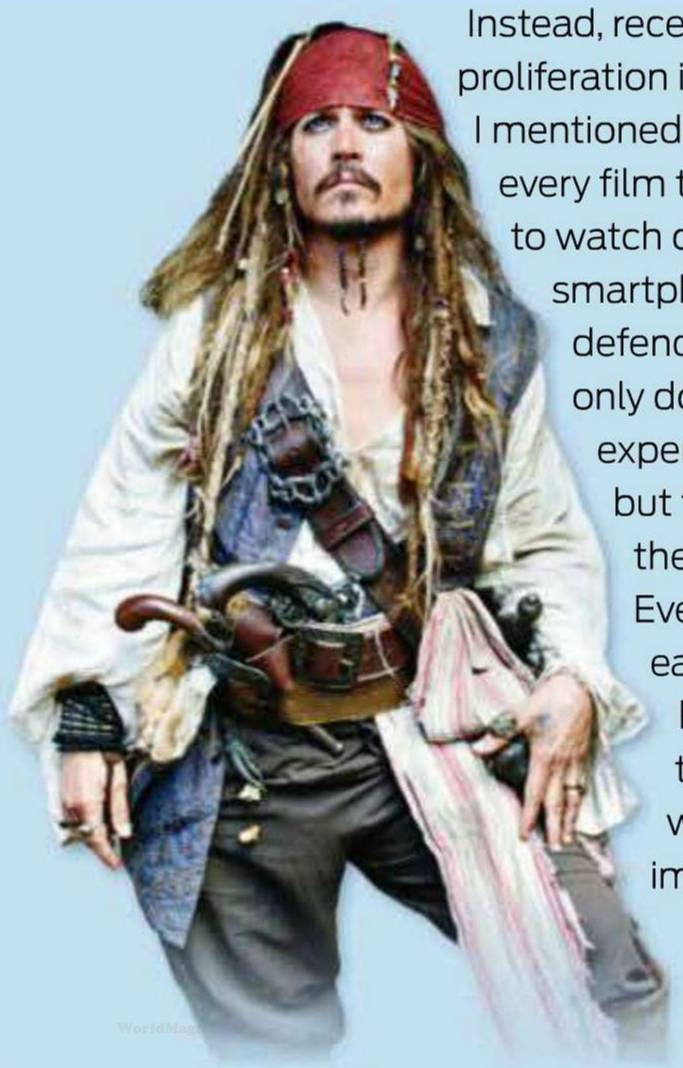
Anton van Beek remembers buying bootleg copies of banned films he couldn't get in stores and compares his experience with today's thieving downloaders



Having to endure the interminable *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* for this esteemed publication is not something that I'll ever look back on as one of the highlights of the Summer. But in the midst of the film's endless running about and pointless bluster, I was overcome by nostalgia for my own days as a pirate. Long before Johnny Depp was appearing in butt-numbing tales of derring-do on the high seas, **my formative years were spent as a bootleg buccaneer, trawling the treacherous waters of film fairs, car boot sales and classified ads** in search of films the British Board of Film Classification had told me I couldn't legally own.

Back then there were two clear types of film pirates. The first were those like myself, who were happy to spend 10 or 15 quid on a legitimate VHS release, but who were essentially forced into the murky backwaters of illegal copies in order to track down titles such as *The Exorcist*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or (God help us) *Nekromantic* – films that had been legally outlawed in this country. The other type of pirate was less discerning; they simply didn't want to pay the going rate to watch movies, and spent their time trading illegal 'camcorder-in-a-cinema' VHS copies of *Crocodile Dundee*, *Look Who's Talking* and *Stakeout.*

Of course, that first type of pirate is now a relic of a bygone age. There's simply no need to track down third- or fourth-generation bootlegs of films in a time when the BBFC has become much more lenient and rarely ever issues an outright ban anymore (*Human Centipede 2* being an exception to the rule). And internet shopping has made importing legitimate DVDs and Blu-rays from anywhere around the world as easy as clicking a mouse button.



Instead, recent years have seen a rapid proliferation in the other type of piracy I mentioned. This time, they download every film they can get their hands on to watch on their computer, tablet or smartphone. And it's always defended by the line that they only do it because 'films are too expensive'. Well, maybe they are, but that doesn't make what these people are doing right. Even if films were only a fiver each to download, it would hardly have any impact on this new breed of pirates who expect everything immediately and f[illegible]

Whisky Galore!

Optimum → Region B BD → £23 Approx



The first of this month's two Ealing comedy classics to debut on Blu-ray, Alexander Mackendrick's charming 1949 adaptation of Compton MacKenzie's novel is about the inhabitants of a remote Scottish island who plunder crates of whisky from a sinking ship during World War II. The newly remastered VC-1 1.33:1 1080p encode does its best, but as the entire film was shot on location, it's no surprise that some of it is in pretty rough shape. Informative extras include a commentary, retrospective documentary and material about the real story. ***AvB***

1 2 3 **4** 5

The Lavender Hill Mob

Optimum → Region B BD → £23 Approx



Alec Guinness and Stanley Holloway star in this marvellous Ealing comedy about a meek bank clerk and an eccentric souvenir maker, who join forces to steal a shipment of gold bullion and smuggle it out of the country as miniature Eiffel Tower replicas. The lovingly remastered AVC 1.33:1 1080p encode still exhibits some minor print damage, but it's a big improvement over all previous releases and is a fine way to celebrate the film's 60th Anniversary, with LPCM 2.0 mono audio that's pleasingly clear. Extras include a restoration comparison and intro from Martin Scorsese. ***MC***

1 2 3 **4** 5

Stand by Me: 25th Anniversary Edition

Sony Pictures → All-region BD → £20 Approx



Sony plucks yet another must-own Blu-ray from its archives with this presentation of Rob Reiner's 1986 classic about the loss of childhood innocence. The biggest problem with the remastered AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode is a slight lack of crispness and vibrancy, but this typifies '80s film stocks. There is a definite improvement, though, in detail and colour saturation over previous releases. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio is less impressive, coming from a mono original. A superb new video commentary joins the director's commentary and retro documentary. ***AvB***

1 2 3 **4** 5

The Big Lebowski

Universal Pictures → All-region BD → £25 Approx



This Coen brothers flick may not have set the box office on fire, but over the past decade it's developed a huge fanbase and even it's own annual Lebowski Fest. Sadly, Universal hasn't quite met our high expectations for the Blu-ray. While far from a disaster, the quality of VC-1 1.85:1 1080p encode is reduced by obvious edge enhancement and the kind of soft detailing that's endemic of noise reduction. The new U-Control features are fairly superfluous, although there are plenty of short featurettes to compensate (Jeff Bridges' on-set photos, for instance). ***AvB***

1 2 **3** 4 5

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Pizza delivery was catching on fast as a leisure activity

Brit talent falls to earth



Hoodies-versus-aliens flick gives an intelligent nod in the direction of fans of the genre

→ Attack the Block

As far as movie taglines go 'Inner city vs outer space' is pretty damn snappy and, incredibly, comedian-turned-filmmaker Joe Cornish has delivered a debut movie that more than lives up to it. *Attack the Block* isn't just the best British genre film since *Shaun of the Dead*, it's the best genre film I've seen in a very long time. Not only is this tale of hoodies versus alien invaders packed with enough knowing references to other great monster movies to make fans smile, Cornish is smart enough to know that his film ultimately has to stand on its own legs. And thanks to the intelligent scripting, nuanced characters, excellent performances, superb gags and slick action scenes, it more than succeeds, clearly signposting this exuberant genre mash-up as the arrival of one of British cinema's most exciting new talents.

Chris Jenkins: *Attack the Block* leaps on to Blu-ray with a very cinematic AVC 2.40:1 1080p hi-def encode. Colour reproduction in particular is very strong, and while the inky blacks are often lacking in shadow detail, as per comic book panels, it's clearly intended to look this way. While some may quibble that this has a (slight) knock-on effect to the Blu-ray's ability to resolve fine detail and textures, it's hard to complain when it's what the director wanted.

Mark Craven: While the film might not have had a massive budget, the sound design ensures that it always feels like a much bigger movie than it really is – a prime example being the sequence in Chapter 9 beginning with fireworks being let off down a hallway and then following the gang members through the smoke-filled space where they can only navigate by sound. But the disc's sublime DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix also succeeds away from the set pieces, and particular praise should be given to the excellent dialogue presentation that ensures perfect clarity.

Anton van Beek: Optimum's Double Play release comes stacked with top-notch extras, plus a DVD copy of the film itself. Three audio commentaries provide plenty of info about the making of the film and, surprisingly enough, don't spend too much time repeating each other. The 'Junior Commentary' finds writer-director Joe Cornish joining some of the younger cast members for a natter about the film's productionn, the 'Senior Commentary' finds him doing the same with some of the older cast members, while the 'Executive Producer Commentary' teams with Edgar Wright for a fascinating insight about the challenges of making your first movie.

When you get through those, there's still more, kicking off with the very entertaining 59-min *Behind the Block* behind-the-scenes documentary. Then there's the superior 20-min featurette about the film's aliens, a 4-min one about the young cast, Cornish discussing two un-filmed action scenes with storyboards, a pair of trailers and a compilation clip of the cast rapping. And all of these video extras are also presented in hi-def. >





HCC VERDICT

Attack the Block: Double Play → Optimum → Region B BD/ R2 DVD → £23 Approx

We say: This dazzling flick gets an HD package to match

Picture: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Sound: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Extras: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Movie: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

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Out of time, out of place

A time travel odyssey becomes a quest to stop a train exploding

→ Source Code

Duncan Jones created a splash with his feature debut, *Moon*, so his next directorial outing arrived on a tide of expectations that would prove almost impossible to meet. While its reach is over ambitious, *Source Code* is still a very successful sci-fi thriller with a cracking *Groundhog Day*-like plot about a repetitive time travelling effort to discover the identity of a mysterious bomber before he strikes again. And while the pseudo-science driving the story sometimes becomes a little overbearing, excellent performances from the film's two time-crossed leads, Jake Gyllenhaal and Michelle Monaghan, give it all an emotional resonance that keeps pulling you back in.

Chris Jenkins: *Source Code* arrives on Blu-ray with an extremely attractive and film-like AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode. While the palette doesn't really offer up the most vibrant colours (outside of the red and yellow flames that repeatedly engulf the train, that is), the film's deliberately cold and wintry visuals are handled with aplomb, aided by flawless black levels, and remain stable throughout. Detailing is also extremely good, giving the imagery a sense of depth and the locations a genuine real-world texture.

Mark Craven: There's a lot to like about *Source Code*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack. The first time the train explodes, the sheer force and impact of the audio will send you out of your seat. Likewise, the slightly claustrophobic nature of the main train carriage location feels less oppressive thanks to smart use of the surrounds for ambient sound such as passengers talking and announcements over the PA. As such, it's a very competent presentation of an equally competent piece of sound design.

Anton van Beek: *Source Code* offers up a reasonable selection of features – kicking off with a trio of PiP modes that deliver *Cast and Crew Insights* (interviews), *Focal Points* (behind-the-scenes vignettes) and *Expert Intel* (scientific explanations) – although they're each fairly sparse and would have worked better combined into a single PiP mode. If you don't want to watch the material in that way, the Special Features menu also allows access to all 11 *Insights*, five *Focal Points* and 19 *Expert Intel* features as full-screen 1080p presentations. The remaining features take the form of a very informative commentary from Jones, Gyllenhaal and writer Ben Ripley, together with the trailer and a pair of trivia tracks.



HCC VERDICT

Source Code: Double Play
Optimum → Region B BD/R2
DVD → £23 Approx

We say: A thrilling Blu-ray you'll want to revisit again and again and again and...

Picture: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Sound: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Extras: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Movie: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5



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Scre4m

Entertainment in Video → Region B BD → £25 Approx



While it proves to be a superior climax to the series than the turgid *Scream 3*, this awkwardly titled sequel struggles to add any fresh wrinkles to the franchise. The good news is that as far as this Blu-ray release goes, it's leaps and bounds above the rest of the franchise when it comes to image quality, thanks to a technically-perfect AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode, awash with a warm autumnal palette and intricate detailing. The biggest disappointment comes from the lack of extras – the disc we received offered up nothing beyond a standard-definition trailer! ***MC***

1 2 **3** 4 5

Julia's Eyes

Optimum → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Here's another cracking Spanish horror that benefits from the guiding hand of producer Guillermo Del Toro. While it eschews *The Orphanage's* supernatural aspects in favour of a more Giallo-inspired setup, *Julia's Eyes* still shares one vital feature – the electrifying actress Belén Rueda, here playing a visually-impaired woman investigating her twin's death. What this disc lacks in extras (some raw on-set footage and short interviews), it makes up for with an exceptional AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and one of the most creative DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes we've heard in a long time. ***MC***

1 2 3 **4** 5

The Roommate

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£23 Approx



I'm honestly shocked that this flick wasn't called *Single White Female 2: The College Years*. Completely devoid of scares, convincing performances or original ideas, *The Roommate*'s biggest failing is being so utterly bland that you'll forget it ever existed five minutes after the final credits roll. The disc features an extremely good-looking AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and satisfying DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. Extras include a commentary that's more enjoyable than the film it supports, seven deleted/alternate scenes, three featurettes and MovieIQ functionality. ***AvB***

1 **2** 3 4 5

Hatchet 2

Arrow Films → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Swamp-dwelling killer, Victor Crowley, is back doing what he does best in this sequel to writer-director Adam Green's 2006 horror hit, *Hatchet*. But after a punchy opening, this flick grinds to a halt as it introduces a plethora of new characters. Thankfully, the second half sees a return to the swamp and a rampage of OTT, gore-strewn mayhem. The film's AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode is drab, but holds some good detail. Thankfully, the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio is as aggressive as Crowley himself. Twin commentary tracks and a 34-min *Making of...* stand out as the pick of the extras. ***AvB***

1 2 **3** 4 5

Shoot-out nasty apes Grindhouse

Digitally shot exploitation movie returns eye ball-searing 'Technicolor' to the screen

→ Hobo with a Shotgun



During the development of Tarantino and Rodriguez's *Grindhouse* vanity project, the duo ran a fake trailer competition, the winner of which would join the professional fake trailers accompanying their double-bill. Jason Eisener's *Hobo...* won and was swiftly optioned to be transformed into an actual feature film starring Rutger Hauer. While the end result is about as puerile and ludicrous as you'd expect (in a good way), it's also feels far more genuine a piece of '70s exploitation cinema than anything Tarantino or Rodriguez have cooked up.

Chris Jenkins: I might not have got much out of the film myself, but that doesn't mean that I can't appreciate the disc's AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode. Shot digitally using Red cameras, the film employs a startlingly over-saturated palette in order to replicate the gaudy Technicolor film stock of the '70s. While it often threatens to burn out your eyeballs with the brightness of its colours, it also holds together extremely well technically on this Blu-ray release (I fear the DVD will struggle by comparison). Add a wealth of fine detail (check out the whiskers on those close-ups of Hauer's grizzled face) and you have a HD presentation I simply cannot fault.

Mark Craven: To be truly authentic to its origins *Hobo with a Shotgun* should sound muffled and distorted. Thankfully, that's not the case at all. This disc packs a killer DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix full of hard-hitting shotgun blasts and frantic spatial effects in the surround speakers. It might not be subtle, but this potent mix suits the film's over-ripe visuals to a tee. Best of all, though, is its treatment of the film's magnificent '70s-style synthesiser score that sounds as if it's come straight from a lost John Carpenter film.



He began a full-on quest to find Cinderella



Anton van Beek: Boasting more extras than the Hobo has shotgun shells, this disc practically overflows with supplementary goodies. The major BD-exclusive is the *Shotgun Mode*, which lets you to drop out of the film to check out behind-the-scenes vignettes. If you don't fancy accessing the material that way, all 44 clips (106 minutes of material in total) can also be accessed separately. Also on offer are a pair of audio commentaries, a 45-min *Making of...* documentary, three deleted scenes, an alternate ending, nine video blogs, a camera test reel, interviews with Eisener and Hauer, the original *Hobo...* fake trailer, the winner of *Hobo*'s very own fake trailer competition (the not particularly amusing *Van Gore*) and the main film's theatrical trailer.

HCC VERDICT

Hobo with a Shotgun
Momentum Pictures → Region B BD
£20 Approx

We say: The last word in fake '70s exploitation flicks

Picture: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Sound: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Extras: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Movie: 1 2 **3** 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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Download Central

Chris Jenkins asks, if MP3 is the music equivalent of the Pot Noodle, is downloaded video also likely to be low-quality junk fare?



It won't be long before disc formats are dead, video rental rests in peace, broadcasting is broken up, and the default method of obtaining movies is by downloading, whether via PC, Smart TV or mobile device. As home cinema enthusiasts, we welcome the convenience this may afford, but we're concerned about the quality compromises that may result. We've seen what has happened to the music industry, where instant, compressed MP3 downloads have seduced buyers away from high-quality audio. The same is likely to happen with video, if consumers don't demand better. But high-quality depends on the practicality of downloading large video files via what may be relatively slow broadband connections.

So, are we cheered by the launch of Sky Go? **At no extra charge, customers can now watch live TV on the move** with the launch of this service.



It's available on laptops, PCs and Macs and offers more than 30 channels including sports, news, Sky Movies, Sky Atlantic, and an extensive library of on-demand content. It will roll out on iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch in time for the beginning of the Premier League football season, when customers will be able to access all five Sky Sports channels, ESPN and Sky News, with further channels and devices to be added.

Customers can register up to two Sky Go devices to watch a selection of the live TV channels they get as part of their TV subscription. Sky Go will be available from August to non-Sky TV customers, with monthly subscriptions priced from £15-£40. Sky will also remain available on Xbox and Fetch TV, but will rebrand simply as Sky (it's currently Sky Player). In time, the service will be supported by Sky's acquisition earlier this year of The Cloud, a public wi-fi network that offers wireless access in over 4,500 public locations. When you're watching Sky Go on your iPhone, iPod touch or iPad, streaming quality can vary depending on the strength of wi-fi/3G bandwidth available. To access the new high-quality streams on iPad, Sky recommends a minimum continuous bandwidth of 2Mbps, and for iPhone/iPod touch, 500kbps. Most of the channels on Sky Go offer a wide range of adaptive bitrates, including an audio-only stream for very weak signals.

Users indicate that they're happy with picture quality, given a reasonably good wi-fi or 3G signal. Our concern is that they are like the MP3 users, who are happy to listen to compressed music on 99p headphones, and don't appreciate how much quality is being lost in th[illegible]ess.

The Extraordinary Adventures of Adele Blanc-Sec



Optimum → Region B BD → £23 Approx

Luc Besson's latest feels like a companion piece to his 1997 sci-fi smash *The Fifth Element* in the way it throws many ideas together and hopes some of them stick. But ...*Adele Blanc-Sec* makes for a more cohesive and charming film. The disc features a beautifully rich and detailed AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and playful DTS-HD MA 5.1 French-language soundtrack (with forced subtitles). Extras take the form of a 26-min *Making of*..., extensive cast and director interviews and a look at the making of a bizarre pop song tie-in. ***AvB***

1 2 3 **4** 5

High School of the Dead: Complete Series Collection



Manga → Region B BD → £35 Approx

This 12-part anime puts a new spin on the traditional zombie apocalypse story, and follows a band of school kids as they try to escape the city's undead horde. The mix of action, horror and teen romance initially makes for compelling stuff, but halfway through the focus shifts almost completely to 'fan service' and spends more time leering at its female characters' bodies. This two-disc Blu-ray set offers a choice of Japanese DTS-HD MA 2.0 and English DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio (the latter packs considerably more punch). ***AvB***

1 2 **3** 4 5

The Twilight Zone: Season Three

Shock Entertainment → Region B BD → £20 → £50 Approx



These bi-monthly sets have fast become must-have Blu-rays for the discerning sci-fi enthusiast. This latest five-disc box serves up another 37 episodes, including two genuine classics: the memorably creepy *It's a Good Life* ('You wished them away into the cornfield') and the much-parodied *To Serve Man* ('It's a cookbook!'). The AVC 1.33:1 1080p encodes are stunning, sourced directly from restored 35mm negatives, and the lossless mono audio (original and remastered) sounds as good as ever. Generous extras include episode commentaries and interviews. ***MC***

1 2 3 4 **5**

Camelot: The Complete First Season

Entertainment One → R2 DVD → £25 Approx



This latest attempt to revisit the Arthurian myth offers an entertainingly Machiavellian Merlin (Joseph Fiennes) and plenty of sex (a trademark of series creator Michael '*The Tudors*' Hearst), but fails to strike a chord. It also doesn't help that Arthur himself is transformed into an uncharismatic pretty boy. No wonder the show was unceremoniously cancelled by US network Starz after this single season. This three-disc DVD release (no Blu-ray for the UK) delivers attractive anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers and the DD5.1 audio is suitably atmospheric. ***AvB***

1 **2** 3 4 5

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Elise wasn't keen on her new 3D spex

A ghost of an idea manifests

Moderately scary movie with an acoustically inventive soundtrack hedges its bets genre-wise



→ Insidious

Writer Leigh Whannell and director James Wan changed the face of modern horror with their low-budget 2004 hit, *Saw*. However, since that ingenious debut, the filmmaking partnership has struggled to come up with a concept as fresh or inventive. (We're talking about the original *Saw* here, not the franchise that followed).

They first served up the derivative spooky ventriloquist dummy flick, *Dead Silence*, and now this curious mix of sub-genres. Initially playing out like a haunted house flick with a young family moving into a new home, *Insidious* then transforms into a possession movie ('It's not the house that's haunted. It's your son!') before finally getting even weirder and heading out into the *Dreamscape*-like territory of astral projection. As you might expect, it doesn't exactly hang together comfortably, but there are at least a few good scares along the way.

Chris Jenkins: Visually *Insidious* is a film of two halves – both handled competently by this Blu-ray's AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode. The first half of the film, the 'haunted house' section if you will, has a deliberately subdued and cold look, full of flat areas of shadow and drab colours. The second half increases colour saturation, which works particularly well with the red-faced demon at the heart of the film's mystery, but also has the benefit of giving the locations and skin tones a slightly warmer feel. Consistently good (if never truly great) fine detailing throughout the entire film helps lend cohesion to the two styles and offers further proof of the quality of the high-definition encode.

Mark Craven: Haunted-house movies offer filmmakers a great excuse to indulge in all manner of acoustic trickery and *Insidious* is no different. As you'd expect, the sound design veers from ominous silence to sudden piercing shrieks, while still managing to find plenty of space to include a *smorgasbord* of atmospheric surround sound effects. Throw in excellent dialogue and music reproduction and you have a very pleasing lossless mix that should thrill fans of the genre.



Anton van Beek: *Insidious* fails to scare up very much in the way of supplementary material for this Blu-ray release. The 10-min *Horror 101: The Exclusive Seminar* finds writer Leigh Whannell and director James Wan breaking down the film into the various sub-genres they're tackling; the 8-min *On Set with Insidious* is a standard behind-the-scenes overview of the production, while the 7-min *Insidious Entities* looks at the creation of the spooks. All three are presented in 1080p, like the film itself. Add the teaser trailer (in 576p standard-def) and that's your lot.





HCC VERDICT

Insidious
Momentum Pictures
Region B BD → £20 Approx

We say: While it packs in plenty of horror clichés, this spook-fest is oddly devoid of extras

Picture: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Sound: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Extras: 1 **2** 3 4 5
Movie: 1 2 **3** 4 5

Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

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Demo screen

The pre-credits sequence in **Star Trek** uses hi-def benefits to make your lower lip wobble



All aboard: *Star Trek*'s pre-credit sequence majors on AV spectacle



Star Trek

Paramount Home Entertainment → All-Region BD → £20 Approx

Time code: 000.56 - 011.30

Science fiction movies have long provided the spectacle that home cinema fans crave, and few come close to matching 2009's *Star Trek* for audio-visual excitement – particularly the scene-setting pre-credits sequence.

Paramount's Blu-ray provides both an exquisite 2.40:1 hi-def image and inventive lossless surround sound, and the movie's opening 10-minute scene, which sees the *USS Kelvin* come under attack from a time-travelling Romulan vessel – is a perfect snapshot.

It's the top-flight visuals that dazzle first. The AVC-encoded picture takes everything that director J.J. '*Lost*' Abrams throws at it without fault. Exterior shots of the USS *Kelvin* gliding through space are jaw-dropping (thanks to first-rate SFX), and everything is presented as sharp as Spock's ears. When the action moves to the ship's bridge, the blues and reds ping and detail levels are astronomical.

Emotional

Backing up this visual flair is the Dolby TrueHD 5.1 mix, which makes use of all surround channels and your subwoofer, to place you right in the heart of the action. It varies from ambient beeps and whirrs, as the camera scoots around the *Kelvin*'s inte[illegible] throbbing LFE when the Romulan ship appears, and front-to-back pans track the subsequent torpedo fire.

The mix has other tricks up its sleeve, too – when one of the ship's crew is blown out into space, the sound *whooshes* away leaving your cinema room sounding like the noiseless vacuum of space. And when George Kirk sacrifices himself to save his unborn son, Michael Giacchino's horn-infused score overrides the frenetic sound mix to lend an operatic air to the sequence's finale. It's almost enough to put a tear in your eye.

So, 600 seconds of heroic high-definition pictures, immersive audio and emotional depth. Ideal demo fodder

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THE TOP 20



> "..the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level."

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation. The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

ACHIEVING POTENTIAL

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that **the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level.** To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity.

Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

WHAT AND WHERE TO BUY

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...**don't** start with **WHAT**, start with **WHERE**. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit **you**.

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GUIDE

TO BUYING HOME CINEMA

LISTED BELOW ARE 20 OF THE BEST AV SHOPS IN THE COUNTRY.

They have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

BUYING OR BEING SOLD TO?

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

GETTING THE BEST DEAL

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.

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York SOUND ORGANISATION
2 Gillygate. 01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk

SCOTLAND

Aberdeen HOLBURN HI-FI
441 Holburn Street. 01224 585713/572729
www.holburnhifi.co.uk

Glasgow GLASGOW AUDIO
135 Great Western Road.
0141 332 2200/4707
www.glasgowaudio.com

CEDIA® BADA

The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

STAR QUALITIES

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SERVICE ..... ★★★★★
FACILITIES ..... ★★★★★
VE[illegible] ..... ★★★★★

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TOP 20 UK SPECIALIST HOME ENTERTAINMENT DEALERS

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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Want to comment on current technology? Need to share? **HCC** is here to help

3DTVs are pointless

I've recently decided that watching 3D on a TV is a complete waste of time. This epiphany came from having a demo of a JVC 3D projector. A room-filling image is clearly the only way to go, as the 3D effect is so much more impressive. Even on a 55in TV I feel I have to focus my attention too much to be able to enjoy what I am watching. With that in mind, when will you be reviewing Sony's new 3D projector and the new Panasonic one?
Terence Miles, via email

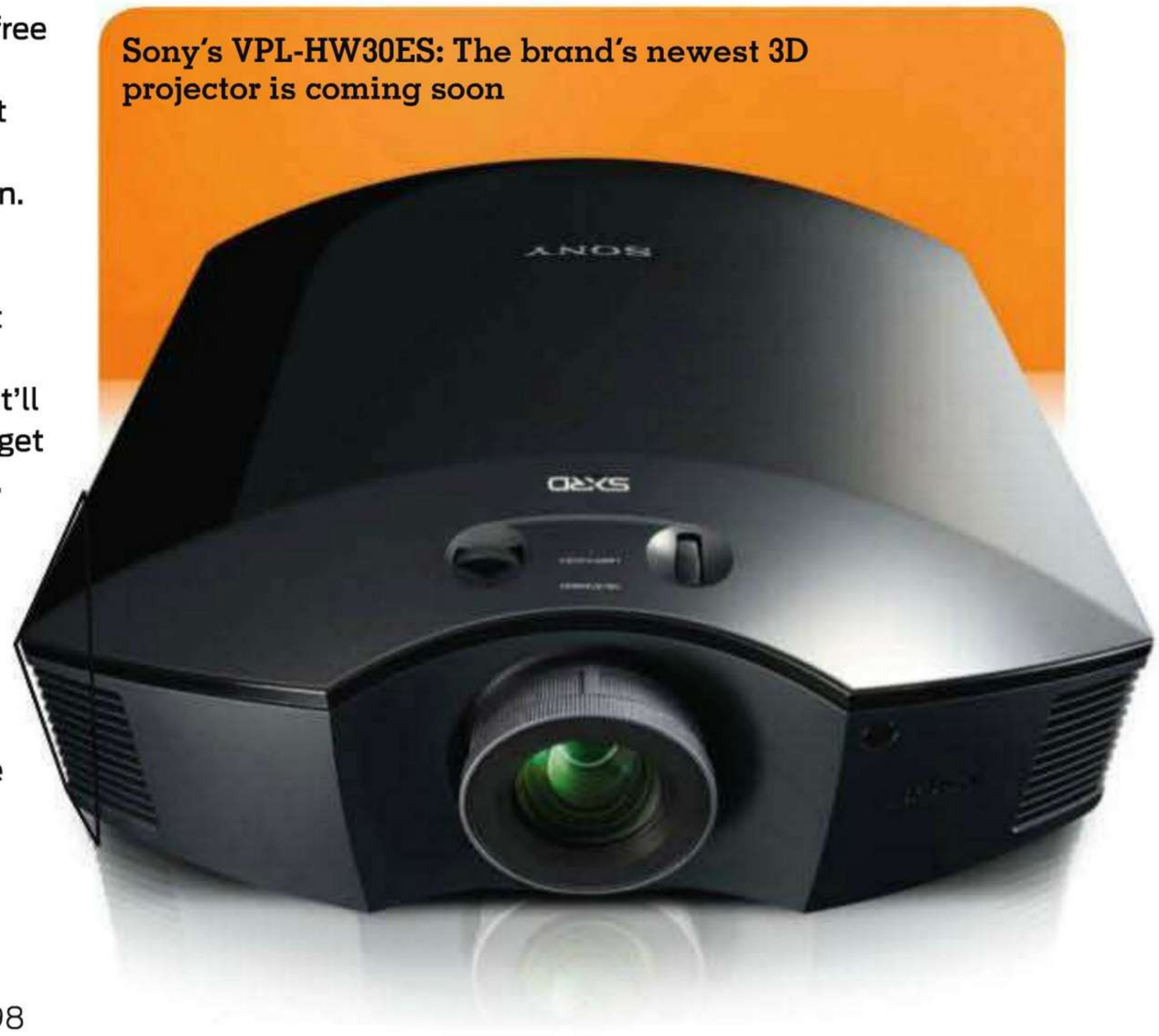
We'd never say that 3DTVs are pointless, but can't argue with you about the benefits of 3D projection. Saying that, we've also been impressed with small-screen, glasses-free technology, such as the LG Optimus 3D smartphone – it could be this area where CE brands really see 3D catch on.

As for bigscreen home cinema thrills, the new Panasonic 3D projector isn't expected to go on sale until near the end of the year, so it'll be a few months before we get our hands on one for review. But we're hoping to see it in action at the IFA tech show in early September.

Regarding the Sony VPL-HW30ES (pictured), we should be running that through our Tech Labs in the next few weeks.

Right to reply

I was interested to read Lee Cawley's contribution to the Feedback section of *HCC* #198



Sony's VPL-HW30ES: The brand's newest 3D projector is coming soon

Star Letter

I'd rather wait for the Blu-ray, thanks

After watching the latest instalment of the *Harry Potter* franchise in fake 3D, I have come to the conclusion that the cinema experience is now dead to me and I am now happy to wait the four months for the movie to be released on Blu-ray, so I can watch it properly, and here are my reasons...

1. 3D. Many studios are insisting on post 3D production, which results in an inferior cinematic experience. Poor 3D distracts you from what could be a decent movie to criticising what you see on the screen. This movie did not need gimmicky 3D forced upon it to increase sales. For me it was just as bad as *Clash of the Titans*! I could go on about 3D forever... For now, all I will say is either film it in 3D or leave it alone!

I tried to watch it in 2D, but my local multiplex relegated this version to their smallest screen forcing me to see the 3D version on their big screen, against my better judgement. Surely this must drive the directors mad seeing their labours of love wrecked by greedy producers.

2. Sound/Picture. When I go to the cinema, I find myself wondering how much better this will look at home! When was the last time you left the movies thinking, 'Wow, the picture quality of that film was amazing?' I'm guessing never.

Also, with the sound, certain theatres still sound great, but I find myself being more immersed in the sound and the detail of my home cinema setup.

3. Price. Taking into consideration the points above, it cost me almost £50 for 3D tickets and popcorn etc, to watch *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2.* The Blu-ray would've cost me around 15 quid and the snacks around an extra fiver for a more enjoyable experience – and I get to keep the film and watch it again whenever I want!

Cinema is dead... Long live Home Cinema!
Ian Worrell, via email



Thanks for your views, Ian. As home cinema enthusiasts, we can only agree wholeheartedly – particularly with the

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as I am the 'someone who openly states that they are illegally ripping DVDs' and who was rewarded with the prize Lee mentions for the Star Letter in a previous issue.

I would like to point out to Lee and your readers that every DVD ripped to my HTPC media server is in fact legally owned and purchased by me. For a crime to have been committed, as Lee alleges, there has to be a perpetrator and a victim. I freely admit to being the perpetrator but I am puzzled as to who is the victim here. Not one single copyright owner has been deprived of one penny of income as a result of my copying my DVDs to a more convenient media format. I still own the original DVDs ,which are now in storage. I would also be staggered if Lee (and most of your readers) do not own some form of MP3 player and have not copied their CDs to it at some stage.

As Barry Fox points out in his excellent article 'Copyright in crisis?' (also HCC #198) the entire legal situation with regard to the copying of legally owned material is now so far behind reality that it threatens to make criminals of us all.
Keith Barnes, via email

The law is an ass

Barry Fox is on safe ground when he says that, as far as copyright is concerned, the law is an ass (*HCC* #198). Consumers, the government and the entertainment industries agree.

Which makes Lee Cawley's letter in the same issue (Naughty Boys) all the more depressing, not to say scary. Mr Cawley essentially states that no-one should copy their DVDs to a server because, well, the law is the law. That kind of dangerous *kindergarten* logic has to be challenged.

Any law must be legitimate – in practical terms, it must be seen as reasonable by most of the population.

Criminal prosecutions are highly unlikely under current UK copyright law, but if one were to take place, can anyone imagine there is a jury in the land that would convict someone for copying their own DVDs? And British law, thankfully, does not mimic the American concept of punitive damages for copyright infringement – UK law does not aim to punish for infringement, just repay the actual amount involved (th[illegible]of the copied DVDs, for example). This makes civil prosecution of individuals uneconomic – unless a Beek-size collection is involved...

The real danger of bad law is that it reduces people's respect for the law in general. That's why copyright law must change. The world is a thousand shades of grey, not black and white.
John Killeen, via email

Barry Fox on safe ground? We think that may be a first...

Cinema deserves better

The Beek hits the nail on the head (*DVD Addict*, *HCC* #196). Intelligent TV programmes about cinema, ones with original content, are considered hard work and too expensive. Why bother when the distributors provide the clips and interviews ready packaged? Throw it together, wrap it in opening and closing credits, sell some advertising, easy! It's all part of the downward spiral of dumbing down. The sad thing is that all these niche channels on Freeview etc should be the ideal home for film-lovers' programmes, ranging far and wide through this wonderful medium in all its facets.
Anonymous, via the website

Ah, but if the niche channels ran proper, thoughtful, cinema-related programmes, where would we go to for re-runs of *Blankety Blank*?

This lack of movie analysis on TV makes us all the more grateful for the extra features on Blu-ray releases. Some of them are awful (a lot like the situation you describe) but documentaries such as the excellent *Dangerous Days: Making Blade Runner* are manna from heaven for film buffs.

Not fast enough

So, Sony recommends a 'broadband internet connection speed of 10Mbps' to use its new 3D Experience service on its Smart TVs.

Ha-ha-ha. 10 Mbps! I have that, according to Virgin Media. Yet, for some strange reason, it never seems to work that way. I can't even stream much lower bitrates, such as BBC iPlayer, without problems a lot of the time – and the usual tests show 6Mbps at best.

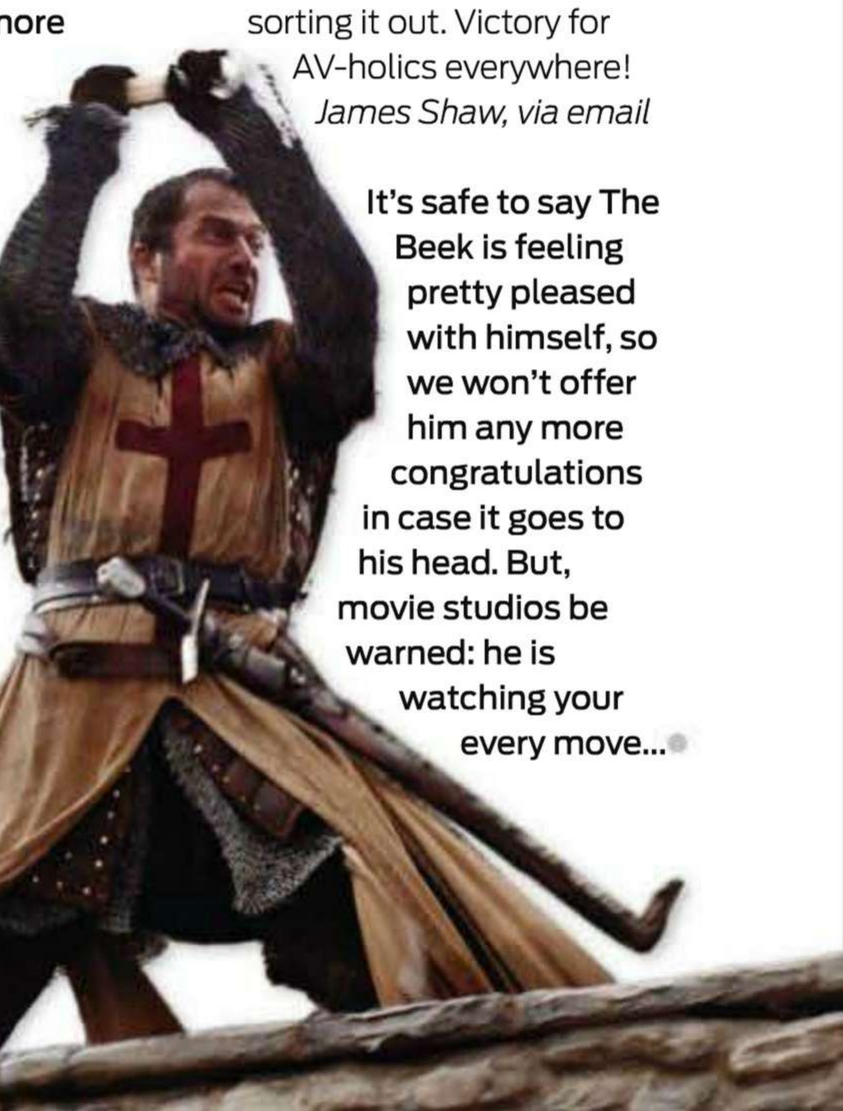
So this service will be unusable in the UK for many people.
Anonymous, via the website

Broadband speeds may well be the hurdle that Smart TV services struggle to overcome – as Richard Stevenson discusses in his *Point of View* column in this very issue (p114).

Well done, The Beek

I was pleased to read on the *HCC* website (July 25) that Warner Home Video is going to release *Ironclad* on Blu-ray [pictured] in the correct aspect ratio – and offer an exchange service to those who've already bought the original, incorrect, disc. Congratulations must go to The Beek and *HCC* for spotting the problem and getting Warner to rectify it. And, I suppose, Warner should be applauded for admitting the error and sorting it out. Victory for AV-holics everywhere!
James Shaw, via email

It's safe to say The Beek is feeling pretty pleased with himself, so we won't offer him any more congratulations in case it goes to his head. But, movie studios be warned: he is watching your every move...



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Due to the volume of letters we receive we cannot guarantee to print/answer them all.

difficulties movie-goers are often faced with if they want to watch the 2D version of a film at their local cinema instead of the converted 3D affair.
As for the price of popcorn, well, we generally tend to smuggle our own snacks in, although we did get caught once trying to stash fried chicken in our coat pocket...

Winner: Star Letter-writer Ian wins a copy of the Clive Owen thriller *Trust* on Blu-ray courtesy of Lionsgate Home Entertainment UK. It's available to buy from August 29, priced at £18 approx.

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How we test

Home Cinema Choice's hardware reviews combine the subjective opinion of our seasoned reviewers with hard technical data. **Chris Jenkins** explains how the *HCC* Tech Labs work

HCC hardware reviews combine the opinions of our experienced reviewers with objective technical data from our test lab. Here's how we do it...

HCC's gear reviews have a long tradition of combining the subjective opinions of experienced reviewers with hard scientific data from our test labs. That way, you can be sure that there's no danger of favouritism or prejudice creeping into the reviews – when we combine the reviewer's opinions with the test data, we can be sure that the results we present to you, the readers, are honest, reliable and accurate.

For over 20 years, we have been developing testing methods for every AV technology from CRT TV and VCRs to the latest 3D flatscreens, multichannel amplifiers and media players. Our testers have been trained by the ISF, Tektronix, Home Acoustic Alliance and other industry bodies, and we use industry-standard testing equipment so we can be confident our results make sense in terms of manufacturers' claims.

Our Tech Labs set-up consists of two main facilities.

The Viewing Room

Used mainly for testing TVs, projectors and speakers, the Viewing Room is designed to reproduce the conditions found in a typical mid-range home cinema installation. Created by award-winning custom installers Pounds (www.poundstv.co.uk), it's completely light-proofed for testing of TVs and projectors, is partially soundproofed using Acoustiblok (www.acoustiblok.com), and has been acoustically treated and tuned using custom absorbers and diffusers by the experts at RPG (www.rpg-europe.co.uk).

The room has a resident Crystal Acoustics TX-T2 7.2 speaker system, Onkyo TX-NR5008 receiver and a Screen Research 100in projection screen. TVs, projectors and other AVRs are moved in as needed for testing. We use a TV stand from Gecko (www.gecko-furniture.co.uk) for mounting flatscreens. A Philips 46PFL9705H TV is used for 3D movie and games playback. The room is fully cabled with speaker, HDMI, and interconnects from Peerless. XLR cables are from Atlas cables. Multiple displays can be fed from the same source using a Gefen 2-in-4-out HDMI switcher/splitter.

The testing equipment used for TVs and projectors is the Chroma5Pro meter and ChromaPure Pro software supplied by Kalibrate Ltd (www.kalibrate.co.uk).

This sophisticated tristimulus colorimeter and analysis software allows us to measure functions such as contrast ratio, colour temperature and luminance, all essentials in picture performance.

The Test Lab

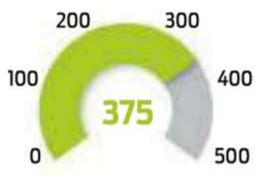
Mainly used for performance analysis of amplifiers and players, the Test Lab is equipped with an Audio Precision APX585 multichannel analyser. This generates programmable test signals, and runs a huge range of tests of functions such as output power, frequency response and distortion. It also has digital audio test functions. A Tektronix VM700 is used for analysis of analogue video signals.

Cables for the test system are again from Peerless.

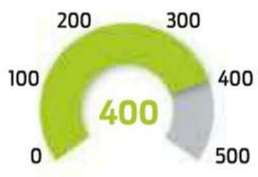
In addition to the main test units, we use a number of audio and video signal generators from Sencore and Snell & Wilcox, analogue test equipment such as a oscilloscope, mains power meters from Maplin, a library of test and measurement DVDs and Blu-rays (plus all the newest software releases), and standardised digital files for media players.

Tech Lab tests explained

TV power consumption: Watts



White screen: This is a measurement of a display's power consumption in Watts when displaying a pure white 100IRE signal with muted audio



Test footage: Here the power consumption is measured with a looped test sequence of live footage (complete with explosions!) and the audio volume up

TV contrast: ratio



Picture: Contrast ratio claims by TV manufacturers are often extravagant, and don't follow an established standard. Our real-world measurements cut through the hype and allow one brand's contrast to be compared with another in a consistent way

Colour temp: Kelvin

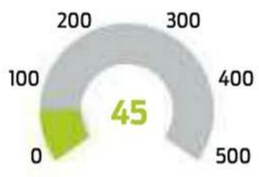


Presets: Most TVs default to a picture setting, which is too bright and 'hot' (blue), in order to make them look good in shops, but also have a choice of colour temperature presets. We tell you which of these gets closest to the industry standard setting of 6,500K (D65)

Blu-ray/DVD power consumption: Watts

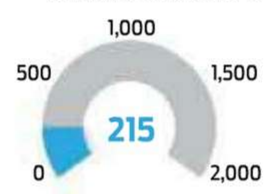


Idling: By EU regulation, standby power consumption for most devices is now under 1W, so we don't usually measure this; but the consumption when power is on can be considerably higher, so we measure this for DVD and Blu-ray players and some other devices



Playing: When a disc is spinning, the device's power consumption usually rises, so we measure when playing a standard disc. In theory, media players should display no change in consumption when playing

Audio Jitter: Ps



Sound: The analogue audio jitter from a device such as a Blu-ray player is measured in picoseconds. The lower the number, the better. Though analogue audio output is perhaps rarely used, jitter is often a good indicator of the general build and component quality of many devices

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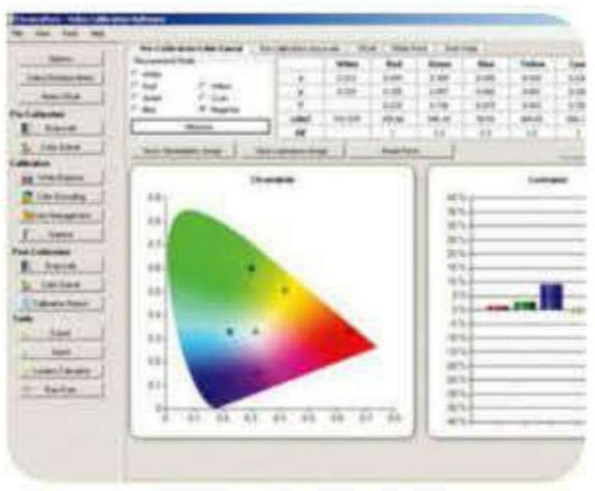
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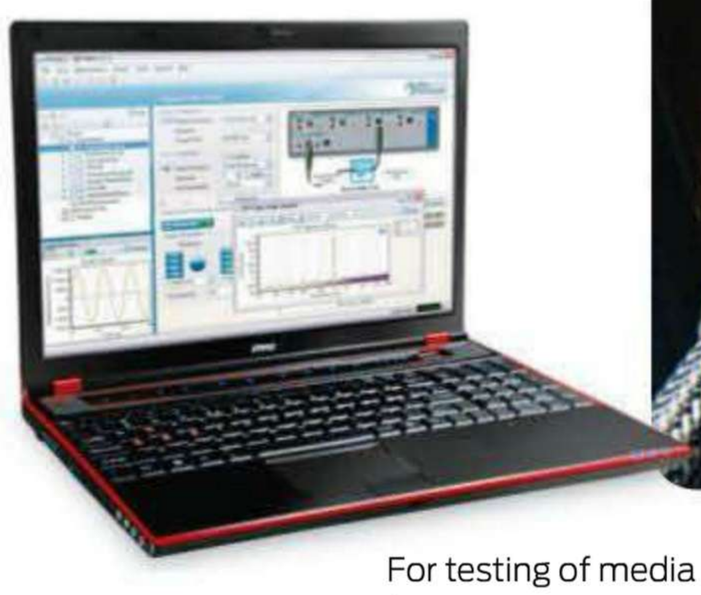






Test bench: The Viewing Room (above) simulates a typical home cinema, while the MSI laptop runs test software for the APX585 analyser (right) and ChromaPure system (above right)





For testing of media software and portable testing applications, we use an MSI GT640 laptop PC with HDMI output and SRS sound.

Results

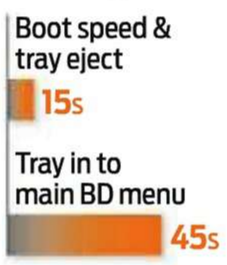
All this testing generates a huge mount of data, which is fed into product reviews and stored on our database. From this we can establish performance averages which help us to keep our scoring realistic. Of course, this mass of information is too unwieldy and detailed to publish in the magazine unedited, so our next job is to present it in a way which is meaningful and easy to understand. Our graphical presentations (see below) should make it all more digestible. So, while one key reviewer is normally by-lined for our tests, the whole team will have been involved in bringing you results you can rely on

Video Jitter: Ns



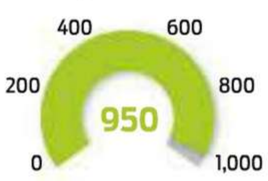
Vision: Again, the analogue video jitter of a DVD or BD player may be less relevant when the digital output is normally used, but it is a good indicator of general build and component quality. We also measure other video quality indicators such as chroma crosstalk and frequency response at 5.8MHz

Loading: Boot/Java



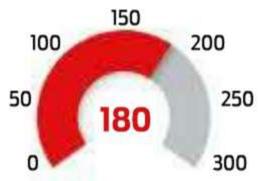
Disc loading & Java: Blu-ray disc players can be annoyingly slow to load and play discs, thanks mainly to the DRM and Java content. We measure times from power on to tray opening, and tray in to boot menu on a standard BD disc

AVR power: Watts

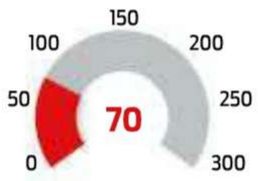


Powered: Power consumption of an AV amp can be high, but it's a requirement of decent output levels. We measure consumption in two states, when idle, and when loaded with a multichannel surround system

Amp output power: Watts (8Ω , 0.5% THD)



2-channel 8Ω: Manufacturers' claims for amplifier output power can be wildly exaggerated, and testing standards vary widely. Our tests deliver a figure for stereo performance with an 8Ω load, and quote a Total Harmonic Distortion result



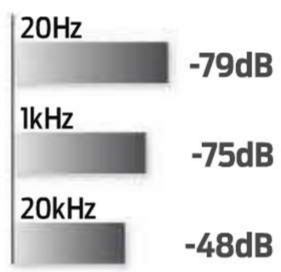
5-channel 8Ω: In most cases, multichannel performance will not match up to the two-channel figure. We push the products to its limit in multi-channel mode and quote the figure reached before unacceptable distortion results

Pure power: Watts



Fidelity firewall: This is our way of measuring an amp's output power ability before it is tainted by distortion. We measure at 1KHz with an 8Ω load to 0.05% THD to get an indication both of output power and component quality

Signal/noise: dB



S/N tests: These amp measurements reveal the ratio of signal to noise at a specific frequency. Low, mid and high readings are taken to determine the imaging and sonic character of the amp

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HCC Ratings key

Officially awesome	5
Essential purchase	4
Does the job	3
Disappointing	2
Don't touch it	1

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TV screens



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Size (inches)	3D type	Panel type	HDMI	Component	PC	Networking	Internet TV	Wi-fi ready	Freeview HD	Freesat HD	Issue	Rating	Comment
LG	50PZ950T	£1,600	50	A	PDP	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	196	1 2 3 4 5	Excellent all rounder, minor judder
LG	47LW550T	£1,200	47	P	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	194	1 2 3 4 5	Web brower is multimedia icing
LG	50PX990	£1,600	50	A	PDP	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	192	1 2 3 4 5	Adds 3D to the 50PK990
LG	50PK990	£1,300	50	–	PDP	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	187	1 2 3 4 5	Image retention needs managing
LG	47LD950	£2,500	47	P	CCFL	4	1	1	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	186	1 2 3 4 5	Lite spec and poor 3D Blu-ray pics
LG	55LX9900	£3,700	55	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	185	1 2 3 4 5	Exceptional 2D pics, 3D X-talk is bad
Loewe	Individual 40	£5,500	40	–	LED	3	1	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊕	⊖	192	1 2 3 4 5	Exquisite design and performance
Panasonic	TX-P55VT30	£2,700	55	A	PDP	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	197	1 2 3 4 5	Sublime plasma is best-in-class
Panasonic	TX-L37DT30	£950	37	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	196	1 2 3 4 5	Do-it-all 3D capable thin screen
Panasonic	TX-P50GT30	£1,800	50	A	PDP	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	195	1 2 3 4 5	Stunning 2D and 3D mid-ranger
Panasonic	TX-P42VT20	£1,800	42	A	PDP	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	190	1 2 3 4 5	Wireless networking as it should be
Panasonic	TX-P42ST30	£1,200	42	A	PDP	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	198	1 2 3 4 5	Entry-level 3D plasma
Panasonic	TX-P50V20	£1,600	50	–	PDP	4	2	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	188	1 2 3 4 5	Every bell and whistle apart from 3D
Panasonic	TX-L42D25	£1,200	42	–	LED	3	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	187	1 2 3 4 5	LED debut scores well visually
Panasonic	TX-P65VT20	£4,800	65	A	PDP	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	186	1 2 3 4 5	Awesomely good big-screen pics
Philips	40PFL8605	£1,300	40	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖	192	1 2 3 4 5	Accomplished 2D pics. Poor X-talk
Philips	Cinema 21:9	£4,000	58	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖	190	1 2 3 4 5	Faultless movie viewing
Philips	46PFL9705	£2,500	46	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖	189	1 2 3 4 5	Networking includes web browser
Samsung	UE40D6530	£1,100	40	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	198	1 2 3 4 5	Brilliant pictures and Smart skills
Samsung	UE40D7000	£1,400	40	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	197	1 2 3 4 5	Gorgeous TV, superb performance
Samsung	UE55D8000	£2,500	55	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	196	1 2 3 4 5	Minor 3D X-talk, otherwise stunning
Samsung	UE46C8000	£1,700	46	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖	192	1 2 3 4 5	Black levels fail to spoil super pics
Samsung	PS50C6900	£1,300	50	A	PDP	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	191	1 2 3 4 5	Great value for money, decent pics
Samsung	PS51D6900	£1,000	51	A	PDP	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	198	1 2 3 4 5	Aggressively priced 3D bigscreen
Samsung	UE65C8000	£5,000	65	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	190	1 2 3 4 5	World's largest 3D LED screen
Samsung	LE46C750	£1,500	46	A	CCFL	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	187	1 2 3 4 5	Limited viewing angle but versatile
Samsung	UE55C9000	£7,000	55	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	185	1 2 3 4 5	Superb designer set – spectacular!
Sharp	LC-37LE320	£700	37	–	LED	3	1	1	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	194	1 2 3 4 5	Tasty set suited to a second room
Sharp	LC-60LE925E	£3,500	60	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖	189	1 2 3 4 5	Outstanding colours but bad X-talk
Sony	KDL-40EX524	£800	40	–	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	197	1 2 3 4 5	Great features, decent 2D-only pics
Sony	KDL-40NX713	£1,000	40	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	193	1 2 3 4 5	Needs optional transmitter for 3D
Sony	KDL-40NX703	£1,000	40	–	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	192	1 2 3 4 5	Looks great in white as well as black
Toshiba	46VL758	£1,500	46	–	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊕	⊖	192	1 2 3 4 5	Undone by inconsistent backlight
Toshiba	55WL768	£1,850	55	A	LED	4	1	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	191	1 2 3 4 5	HD good, 3D bad. Basic online stuff

A= Active. P= Passive

TV SCREENS EXPLAINED...

PLASMA VS LCD. PLUS, 3D'S RIVAL SYSTEMS

The TV market is becoming increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play. These generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D cross-talk, but less brightness.

Most 3D screens feature the Active system that uses expensive powered 3D specs to deliver full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of 3D is halved to 540 lines.

Editor's Choice...



SAMSUNG

55in → UE55D8000 → £2,500 Approx

Samsung's cost-no-object 9000 series launched in 2010 but still tops the brand's range – however, if you want Samsung's most technologically advanced screen then look no further than its 2011 8000 series. Stunning looks with pics to match.

Tested: Issue 196
For more info visit: www.samsung.co.uk

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Blu-ray players



Manufacturer	Model	Price	BD Live storage	3D	Multi-channel analogue out	HDMI	USB	Online portal	Wi-fi ready	DVD-Audio/ SACD	Issue	Rating	Comment
Anthem	BLX 200	£600	⊕	⊖	⊖	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖/⊖	183	1 2 3 4 5	**Lacks legacy AVR support but images are super**
Arcam	FMJ-BDP100	£1,000	⊖	⊖	⊖	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖/⊖	194	1 2 3 4 5	**Rock-solid build quality and pics to match**
Cambridge Audio	Azur 650BD	£400	⊕	⊖	⊕	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊕/⊕	184	1 2 3 4 5	**Top-notch build pays dividends with 2D fodder**
Denon	DBP-1611UD	£400	⊕	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊕/⊕	194	1 2 3 4 5	**Awful GUI but 3D pics are as good as it gets**
Denon	DBP-2012UD	£750	⊕	⊕	⊕	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊕/⊕	198	1 2 3 4 5	**High-performance player with battleship build**
Denon	DVD-A1UD	£4,500	⊕	⊖	⊕	2	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊕/⊕	178	1 2 3 4 5	**Unsurpassed reference quality audio and pics**
Denon	Cara	£2,000	⊖	⊖	⊖	4	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖/⊖	185	1 2 3 4 5	**With built-in 5 x 75W digital amp**
Dune	Smart B1	£240	⊖	⊖	⊖	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	198	1 2 3 4 5	**Advanced networking features will wow techies**
LG	BX580	£150	⊖	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	189	1 2 3 4 5	**Reasonable BD pics, messy DVD upscaler**
LG	BD570	£200	⊖	⊕	⊕	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	186	1 2 3 4 5	**Speedy loading and highly multi-media capable**
LG	HLB54S	£600	⊖	⊖	⊖	1	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖/⊖	184	1 2 3 4 5	**With built-in soundbar of dubious sonic quality**
NAD	M56	£1,900	⊖	⊖	⊕	1	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖/⊖	183	1 2 3 4 5	**Motion processing issues spoil the day**
Onkyo	BD-SP808	£500	⊖	⊖	⊖	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖/⊖	195	1 2 3 4 5	**Accomplished disc spinner. Slow disc loader**
Oppo	BDP-95EU	£900	⊕	⊕	⊕	2	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊕/⊕	197	1 2 3 4 5	**Even better build and results than the BDP-93EU**
Oppo	BDP-93EU	£500	⊕	⊕	⊕	2	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊕/⊕	195	1 2 3 4 5	**Awesomely good video and music performance**
Oppo	BDP-83SE	£1,300	⊖	⊖	⊕	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊕/⊕	190	1 2 3 4 5	**Precision engineered analogue audio output**
Panasonic	DMP-BD75	£110	⊖	⊖	⊖	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖/⊖	196	1 2 3 4 5	**OK images, quick loader, underwhelming to use**
Panasonic	DMP-BDT310	£260	⊖	⊕	⊖	2	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	194	1 2 3 4 5	**Terrific new GUI, refined sound and pictures**
Panasonic	DMP-BDT300	£260	⊖	⊕	⊕	2	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	194	1 2 3 4 5	**Versatile, aging deck. Look out for discounts**
Panasonic	BFT800EBK	£650	⊕	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	192	1 2 3 4 5	**Built-in soundbar and iPod dock. Great 3D pics**
Philips	BDP7600	£200	⊖	⊕	⊕	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	198	1 2 3 4 5	**Feature-heavy deck with open web browser**
Philips	BDP7500 MKII	£200	⊕	⊕	⊕	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	194	1 2 3 4 5	**Slickly designed with decent 2D and 3D images**
Pioneer	BDP-LX53	£400	⊖	⊖	⊖	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖/⊖	187	1 2 3 4 5	**Basic and slow to load but impressive BD pics**
Pioneer	BDP-LX91	£1,800	⊖	⊖	⊖	2	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖/⊖	167	1 2 3 4 5	**Aging deck but exemplary picture performance**
Samsung	BD-D7500	£250	⊕	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	198	1 2 3 4 5	**Style-centric wall-mountable 3D player**
Samsung	BD-D6900	£300	⊖	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖/⊖	195	1 2 3 4 5	**Decent BD deck with built-in Freeview HD tuner**
Samsung	BD-C6900	£255	⊕	⊕	⊕	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	194	1 2 3 4 5	**Quick loader, versatile deck. Passable pictures**
Sharp	BD-HP90S	£290	⊕	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊖	194	1 2 3 4 5	**Slot-loading vertical design, expensive**
Sony	BDP-S480	£150	⊖	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊕	198	1 2 3 4 5	**Brilliant deck offers superior VOD at a low price**
Sony	BDP-S570	£160	⊕	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖/⊕	185	1 2 3 4 5	**Supreme quality deck; plenty of web content**
Toshiba	BDX3100	£185	⊖	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖/⊖	194	1 2 3 4 5	**Feature-light but does the job with solid pics**
Toshiba	BDX3200	£150	⊖	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖/⊖	197	1 2 3 4 5	**Unexciting player can't compete with rivals**
Yamaha	BD-S667	£300	⊖	⊕	⊖	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖/⊖	189	1 2 3 4 5	**Impressive but best partnered to a Yamaha AVR**

BLU-RAY EXPLAINED...

MATCHING YOUR DECK TO YOUR AMP

Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images (some do it much better than others of course) but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a deck, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your amplifier. If it's an older model that doesn't have HDMI inputs then you'll need a BD player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy hi-res surround sound formats. Most current AVRs have HDMI inputs that accept bitstreamed Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD MA, but not all receivers can cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one for the amp, one for the TV.

Editor's Choice...



PANASONIC

DMP-BDT310 → £260 Approx

This second-gen 3D deck improves on its BDT300 predecessor thanks to new tricks and a lower asking price. Standout features – alongside the excellent 2D and 3D playback – are Skype functionality, 2D-3D conversion, faster loading times and a revamped GUI that takes usability to the next level. Motion-sensitive controls bring even more to the party.

Tested: Issue 194
For more info visit: www.panasonic.co.uk

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AV Receivers



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Claimed power	THX	Multi-ch in	HDMI in	HDMI out	3D	Dolby True HD	DTS HD MA	Networking	Net tuner	Issue	Rating	Comment
Anthem	MRX 700	£2,100	7 x 120W	⊖	⊖	4	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖	195	4	Complex set-up, great EQ sound
Arcam	AVR400	£1,700	7 x 90W	⊖	⊕	5	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	194	4	Beautifully built. Ace analogue audio
Denon	AVR-4311	£2,000	9 x 170W	⊖	⊕	6	2	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	193	5	Polished audio, Airplay streaming
Denon	AVR-1611	£350	7 x 110W	⊖	⊖	4	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	191	4	Uses binding posts. Decent sound
Denon	AVR-2311	£800	7 x 135W	⊖	⊖	6	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖	190	4	iPod dock but no networking
Marantz	SR7005	£1,400	7 x 125W	⊖	⊕	6	2	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	187	5	Great home cinema amp
Onkyo	TX-NR609	£500	7 x 60W	⊕	⊖	6	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	195	5	Comprehensive, stunning performer
Onkyo	TX-NR5008	£2,400	9 x 140W	⊕	⊕	8	2	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	191	4	Versatile and capable of brilliance
Onkyo	TX-SR308	£250	5 x 100W	⊖	⊖	3	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖	191	3	Under specified and under powered
Onkyo	TX-SR608	£450	7 x 160W	⊕	⊖	6	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖	184	4	Dynamic sound, decent features
Pioneer	VSX-520	£300	5 x 130W	⊖	⊖	3	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖	191	4	Decent sound; spring-clip terminals
Pioneer	SC-LX83	£2,000	7 x 190W	⊕	⊕	3	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	186	5	Punchy audio with superb control
Pioneer	VSX-920	£500	7 x 140W	⊖	⊖	4	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	185	4	Cool iPod integration, lacks guts a bit
Sony	STR-DH810	£300	7 x 140W	⊖	⊖	4	1	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖	186	4	Easy to use. Impressive audio
Yamaha	RXV-3067	£1,500	7 x 140W	⊖	⊕	8	2	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	194	4	Superb and musical reproduction
Yamaha	RXV-367	£200	5 x 120W	⊖	⊖	4	1	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	191	3	Budget spec and sound to match
Yamaha	RXV-1067	£850	7 x 105W	⊖	⊕	8	2	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	190	4	Optimised for cinema. Good connects

Systems



Manufacturer	Model	Price	3D	Claimed power	Configuration	Dolby True HD	DTS HD MA	HDMI in/out	Component	Online portal	Wi-fi ready	Issue	Rating	Comment
Harman/Kardon	BDS800	£1,100	⊖	525W	5.1	⊕	⊕	0/1	⊖	⊖	⊖	194	3	Nil by 1080p24. OK performance
LG	HB-965TZ	£600	⊖	1,100W	5.1	⊕	⊕	2/1	⊕	⊕	⊕	187	4	Lovely flat speakers and excellent GUI
Panasonic	SC-BTT775	£400	⊕	1,000W	5.1	⊕	⊕	2/1	⊖	⊕	⊕	198	3	A decent starter system for AV novices
Panasonic	SC-BTT350	£370	⊕	1,000W	5.1	⊕	⊕	0/1	⊖	⊕	⊕	190	3	Sonics don't match the versatility
Panasonic	SC-BT320	£400	⊖	1,000W	5.1	⊕	⊕	1/1	⊕	⊕	⊖	187	2	Pics are ok but a right pain to use
Panasonic	SC-BT330	£500	⊖	1,000W	5.1	⊕	⊕	0/1	⊖	⊕	⊕	183	4	Great BD deck; decent audio performer
Samsung	HT-D6750W	£800	⊕	1,300W	5.1	⊕	⊕	2/1	⊕	⊕	⊖	197	3	Claims to be 7.1 but isn't
Samsung	HT-C9950W	£2,000	⊕	1,000W	7.1	⊕	⊕	2/1	⊕	⊕	⊕	190	4	Perfect style match for Samsung's TVs
Samsung	HT-C6730	£600	⊖	1,330W	7.1	⊕	⊕	1/1	⊕	⊕	⊕	187	4	Room-filling sonics; wireless rear speakers
Sony	BDV-E370	£500	⊕	850W	5.1	⊕	⊕	0/1	⊕	⊕	⊕	187	3	Good sound at low volume; SACD playback

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Speakers



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Configuration	Front max power	Rear max power	Centre max power	Sub power	bookshelf	Issue	Rating	Comment
AE	Aegis Neo V2	£1,000	5.1	2 x 120W	2 x 120W	120W	200W	all	184	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Likes to be driven hard. Tasty looks**
Bowers & Wilkins	800 Diamond	£22,500	5.1	2 x 500W	2 x 120W	300W	1,000W	no	196	1 2 3 4 **5**	**Breathtaking sound, bonkers price**
Cambridge Audio	Minx S325	£800	5.1	2 x 75W	2 x 75W	75W	300W	all	195	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Extraordinary power for dinky size**
Canton	CD 105	£500	5.1	2 x 100W	2 x 100W	100W	100W	all	196	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Potent but suited to smaller areas**
Canton	Vento 800	£6,650	5.1	2 x 140W	2 x 80W	85W	750W	rear	194	1 2 3 4 **5**	**Fab definition & fidelity**
Crystal Acoustics	TX-T2-12	£1,300	5.1	2 x 150W	2 x 100W	100W	200W	rear	185	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Powerful but can sound brash**
Crystal Acoustics	BPT5	£600	5.1	2 x 125W	2 x 125W	125W	120W	no	187	1 2 **3** 4 5	**Bipoles suited to smaller rooms**
Eclipse	Time Domain	£16,500	5.1	2 x 70W	2 x 70W	70W	500W	no	189	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Gorgeous design and articulation**
EMP Tek	Impression	£4,000	7.1	2 x 200W	2 x 200W	120W	100W	surr	193	1 2 3 **4** 5	**With 2 x 100W surrounds. Thrilling**
Image Audio	IA 8/5/C	£4,000	5.0	2 x 150W	2 x 150W	300W	n/a	no	195	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Excellent flat panel speakers**
KEF	T-Series T205	£1,500	5.1	2 x 150W	2 x 100W	150W	250W	no	192	1 2 3 4 **5**	**Skinny and stylish. Immersive**
Klipsch	HD Theatre	£500	5.1	2 x 100W	2 x 100w	100W	100W	all	192	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Horn tweeters are a tad rough**
Magnat	Quantum 650	£1,700	5.1	2 x 350W	2 x 180W	180W	270W	rear	198	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Potent system at a good price**
Monitor Audio	Apex	£2,425	5.1	2 x 100W	2 x 100W	200W	500W	rear	190	1 2 3 4 **5**	**Luxury styling and performance**
Monitor Audio	Bronze BX	£1,350	5.1	2 x 120W	2 x 80W	120W	200W	rear	191	1 2 **3** 4 5	**Sub strains to keep up.**
Monitor Audio	Silver RX6 AV12	£2,200	5.1	2 x 125W	2 x 125W	80W	500W	rear	184	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Dynamic, detailed and engaging**
Pioneer	S71	£2,600	5.1	2 x 130W	2 x 130W	130W	280W	rear	194	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Immersive sound. Severe looking**
PSB	Imagine Series	£3,035	5.1	2 x 200W	2 x 150W	150W	500W	rear	188	1 2 3 4 **5**	**Unexpected impact for the price**
Q Acoustics	2000 series	£550	5.1	2 x 75W	2 x 75W	100W	140W	all	185	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Detailed, compact sub/sat system**
Stealth Acoustics	LR Series 7.2	£7,000	7.2	2 x 200W	4 x100W	200W	2 x 200W	no	189	1 2 3 **4** 5	**'Invisible' flat surface speakers**
Tannoy	Definition	£8,200	5.0	2 x 400W	2 x 350W	350W	n/a	rear	197	1 2 3 4 **5**	**Worth every penny. Bring on the sub**
Tannoy	Arena HL 300	£1,850	5.1	2 x 75W	2 x 75W	75W	300W	no	198	1 2 3 **4** 5	**High-end sub/sats with style**
Teufel	Columa 100	£350	5.1	2 x 100W	2 x 100W	100W	100W	no	195	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Energetic floorstanders. Ace sub**
Teufel	Theatre 200	£800	5.1	2 x 140W	2 x 150W	140W	250W	all	195	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Bold sats, sub suffers colouration**
Quadral	Chromium 5.1	£2,700	5.1	not given	not given	not given	150W	rear	197	1 2 3 **4** 5	**Top quality drivers, nice cabinets**
XTZ	99 Series	£2,200	5.1	2 x 550W	2 x 100W	100W	300W	no	193	1 2 3 4 **5**	**Big, tunable sound. Mail-order**

AV Mastermind answers, *from p30*

1: Answer: B. Though the colour temperature of calibrated daylight movie film is 5600K.

2: Answer: B. What a shame that getting different brands and vintages of HDMI-interfaced equipment to coexist isn't as easy...

3: Answer: A. SPL stands for Sound Pressure Level

4: Answer: C. The average human eye contains 90 million brightness-sensitive rods, and around 4.5 million colour-sensitive cones. The rods perform better in darkness, and that's why colour sensitivity diminishes with falling light levels.

5: Answer: A. The effect is not dissimilar in subjective to an overexposed photo. Usually, the culprit is excessive contrast (video level)

6: Answer: C. For SDTV, the matrix is 0.229R + 0.587G + 0.114B. For HDTV it is 0.2126R + 0.7152G + 0.0722B

7: Answer: B. It's an acronym for 'Picture Line-Up Generating Equipment'

8: Answer: C. The multiburst's finer gratings will reveal any scaling artifacts – instead of a sequence clearly-defined lines, you'll see mush or an odd pattern. If so, check the settings of the source's output and TV scaler

9: Answer: A, and a pretty lousy picture. Time to get out the test pattern generator/disc - use the pluge and grey-scale bars. Or call your installer.

10: Answer: A. In fact, that's the basic procedure we use to measure contrast ratio in HCC's Tech Labs

11: Answer: B. It seems as if the colour control is turned up too high. Examine this before anything else...

12: Answer: C. Autostereoscopic 3D usually uses lenticular overlay or parallax-barrier technology

13: Answer: A. Source scaling circuitry tends to be superior to that built into a TV or amp/processor

14: Answer: A. You'll avoid unnecessary conversion between digital and analogue, thereby achieving better quality. And usually D, too.

15: Answer: B. Though iPlayer sometimes delivers pictures superior to digital terrestrial...

16: Answer: Trick question. None of them. All processing degrades resolution to some extent

17: Answer: C. More output power improves headroom, particularly important for movies with dynamic soundtracks

18: Answer: B & C. Digital equalisers built into modern AVRs have minimal impact on sound quality and can benefit tone control

19: Answer: A. It's used for - amongst other things - measuring the colour reproduction abilities of any display

20: Answer: C. When Freeview telly-addicts press the 'red button', they're taking advantage of the work of the Multimedia and Hypermedia Experts' Group

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Projectors



Manufacturer	Model	Price (Original)	Type	Resolution	3D	HDMI	Component	12V trigger	Fan noise/dB	lamp life/hr	Issue	Rating	Comment
BenQ	W1100	£900	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	22	2,500	197	4	Dynamic images, noisy fan
BenQ	W1000+	£750	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	26	5,000	193	5	Performance transcends price
Casio	XJ-A235	£1,000	DLP	1280 x 800	⊖	1	0	0	29	20,000	192	3	LED/DLP hybrid. Poor pics
Epson	EH-TW3600	£1,300	LCD	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	22	4,000	193	3	Bright pics but average black levels
Epson	EH-TW5500	£4,000	LCD	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	22	4,000	181	4	Easy and flexible to set up
InFocus	SP8600	£800	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	30	2,500	198	4	Excellent sub-£1k projector
InFocus	SP8604	£2,500	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	3	1	2	28	3,000	196	4	Versatile PJ with decent pictures
InFocus	SP8602	£3,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	3	3	28	2,500	182	4	Good pics with minor operating flaws
JVC	DLA-X3	£3,600	D-ILA	1920 x 1080	⊕	2	1	1	20	3,000	193	4	Aces 2D images, X-talk with 3D
JVC	DLA-X7	£5,550	D-ILA	1920 x 1080	⊕	2	1	1	20	3,000	195	5	Brightness and black level to die for
JVC	DLA-HD990	£9,000	D-ILA	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	19	3,000	185	5	Gorgeous with amazing black levels
Optoma	HD67N	£500	DLP	1280 x 720	⊖	1	2	0	29	3,000	194	3	With so-so 3D using a 3D-Xl adapter
Optoma	HD20	£900	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	1	2	0	29	4,000	176	4	One of the first budget Full HD PJs
Panasonic	PT-AE4000	£2,500	LCD	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	22	2,000	177	4	Filmic pictures and easy to setup
Runco	LS-5	£7,500	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	2	2	30	4,000	187	5	3-chip performance from one chip
Sanyo	PLV-Z4000	£1,800	LCD	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	2	1	19	3,000	191	4	Quiet. Yellow-ish but filmic images
Sharp	XV-Z17000	£4,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊕	2	1	0	n/a	n/a	196	4	Living room friendly, 3D impresses
SIM2	MICO 40	£11,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	2	n/a	30,000	189	5	Eco-friendly LED-lit and versatile
SIM2	C3X Lumis Uno	£19,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	3	32	2,500	184	4	Supreme pics but lacks manual iris
Sony	VPL-VW90ES	£5,400	SXRD	1920 x 1080	⊕	2	1	1	22	n/a	192	5	Bright pics but average black levels
Sony	VPL-VW85	£5,400	SXRD	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	20	3,000	174	4	Elderly but impressive SXRD PJ
Sony	VPL-HW20	£2,400	SXRD	1920 x 1080	⊕	2	1	0	20	n/a	190	5	Complex but capable of greatness
ViewSonic	PRO8200	£900	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	27	3,000	192	3	Falters with motion resolution
Vivitek	H9080FD	£10,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	n/a	4,000	173	4	World's first 'lampless' LED projector
Vivitek	H1085	£1,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	2	1	1	26	4,000	179	4	Affordable DLP PJ could be quieter
Vivitek	H5080	£2,700	DLP	1920 x 1080	⊖	3	1	2	27	2,000	186	4	Excellent contrast and colour. Noisy

PROJECTOR SCREENS EXPLAINED...

FIXED FRAME OR ROLL AWAY?

When buying a projector, it's important to think about what screen you're going to partner it with. There are two main approaches – fixed-frame, where the screen is placed in a rigid frame and attached permanently to the wall, or 'roll-away' where it can be rolled up when not in use, including via neat, motorised systems. For the best picture quality and dedicated cinema rooms, fixed frame is preferable, as permanent screens generally stay more tautly stretched and deliver the most accurate pictures. Roll-away screens are more suited to when the room needs to double as a living room. Pricing, of course, varies depending on what size you need.

Editor's Choice...



SONY
SXRD → VPL-VW90ES
→ £5,400 Approx

Sony's range-topping projector marries an exemplary 2D picture performance with one of the best active shutter 3D systems we've seen. And, aside from its video prowess, it features smart design, solid build and versatile installation options.

Tested: Issue 192
For more info visit: www.sony.co.uk/biz

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Media Players



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Type	HDD	3D	HDMI	Upscaling	DLNA	Online portal	USB playback	Wi-fi ready	Issue	Rating	Comment
AC Ryan	PlayOn! HD Essential	£130	Player	1TB	⊖	1	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊕	⊕	194	1 2 3 4 5	**No Ethernet. Network via wi-fi dongle**
Apple	Apple TV	£100	VOD	⊖	⊖	1	720p	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊕	190	1 2 3 4 5	**Great interface undone by meagre content**
Boxee	Boxee Box	£200	VOD	⊖	⊖	1	1080p	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊕	193	1 2 3 4 5	**iPlayer access. Browser is a pain to use**
Buffalo	Linkstation Pro LS-VL	£170	NAS	1TB	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖	192	1 2 3 4 5	**With Bit Torrent client**
Digital Stream	DPS-1000	£90	VOD	⊖	⊖	1	1080i	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	196	1 2 3 4 5	**Good for VOD services, no optical out**
Iomega	StorCenter IX2-200	£215	NAS	2TB	⊖	0	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊕	182	1 2 3 4 5	**Pocket-sized powerhouse with handy one-touch USB copy**
Iomega	Screenplay MX	£140	Player	1TB	⊖	1	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊕	⊖	194	1 2 3 4 5	**No optical audio out or hi-res audio**
Iomega	Screenplay MX TV Link Director's Edition	£90	Player	⊖	⊖	1	1080p	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	185	1 2 3 4 5	**Wallet-friendly player is well-specced, but lack of search function can make trawling content a pain**
Netgear	ReadyNAS NVX	£500	NAS	1TB	⊖	0	⊖	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	185	1 2 3 4 5	**Tank-like NAS can accommodate up to 8TB of storage**
Pogoplug	PogoPlug	£100	NAS	⊖	⊖	0	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖	184	1 2 3 4 5	**Bizarre-looking but very efficient**
Sony	SMP-N100	£120	VOD	⊖	⊖	1	⊖	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	193	1 2 3 4 5	**Bravia Internet TV and streaming aplenty**
Synology	USB Station 2	£85	NAS	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖	193	1 2 3 4 5	**Simply add your own USB hard disks**
Synology	DS410	£400	NAS	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖	190	1 2 3 4 5	**Accommodates up to 8TB of SATA drives**
Toshiba	Stor.E TV+	£170	Player	1TB	⊖	1	1080p	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖	195	1 2 3 4 5	**Supports wide range of file formats**
Verbatim	MediaShare	£130	NAS	1TB	⊖	1	⊖	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	188	1 2 3 4 5	**Stylish, well-featured NAS**
Viewsonic	VMP74	£135	Player	⊖	⊖	1	1080p	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	187	1 2 3 4 5	**Good file compatibility, neat design**
WD	WD TV Live Hub	£200	Player	1TB	⊖	1	1080p	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊕	190	1 2 3 4 5	**Superb multi-format player**
WD	WD TV Mini	£48	Player	⊖	⊖	0	1080i	⊖	⊖	⊕	⊖	189	1 2 3 4 5	**Tiny media player lacks HDMI output**

HOME CINEMA Choice

ISSUE #200 ON SALE Sep 22

In the next issue

Star Wars hits Blu-ray – The secrets behind the year's biggest disc release
D.I.Y Home Cinema Part 2 – Putting the finishing touches to your room
200 issues of HCC – the highs and lows of 16 years of AV

On test

MARANTZ UD7006 Universal high-end Blu-ray player **PIONEER VSX-2021** Mid-range 7.1 AVR with AirPlay and net radio **REL G1** Premium-grade subwoofer from the bass experts **ROUNDUP** Five 40-42in flatscreen TVs put through their paces **PLUS:** In-depth news, BD reviews and more



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Recorders



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Type	HDD/GB	HDMI	Component	Scart	USB Media	Online portal	Wi-fi ready	Issue	Rating	Comment
3View	3VHD	£300	F'view HD	500	1	0	1	+	+	-	193	4	Good recorder, scant internet TV offering
Digitalstream	DHR8205U	£300	F'view HD	500	1	0	1	+	-	-	185	4	Below-par standard def pics. Handy CI slot
Echostar	HDS-600RS	£350	F'sat HD	500	1	0	2	+	+	-	196	4	Solid PVR with built-in SlingPlayer feature
Humax	HDR-FOX T2	£330	F'view HD	250	1	0	1	+	+	+	190	5	Lovely to use with great quality results
Panasonic	DMR-BWT700	£500	F'view HD	320	1	0	2	+	+	+	197	4	Complex with Blu-ray recorder and 3D player
Samsung	SMT-S7800	£280	F'sat HD	500	1	0	2	+	+	+	197	4	Good recorder, scant internet TV offering
Samsung	BD-D8500	£380	F'view HD	500	1	1	0	+	+	+	194	4	With 3D Blu-ray deck. Only records one tuner
TVonics	DTR-Z500HD	£230	F'view HD	500	3	0	1	+	-	-	196	3	Handy HDMI switcher, dire for multi-media
Virgin Media	TiVo	£200	Cable TV	1TB	1	0	1	-	+	-	195	5	Awesome 3- tuner PVR. No BBC red button

Subwoofers



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Sealed/ported	Power (RMS)	Frequency response/Hz	Driver size	Dimensions/ (w x h x d)mm	Weight/kg	Issue	Rating	Comment
BK Electronics	XXLS400DF	£410	S	400W	19-120	12in	400 x 460 x400	28	196	5	Clean and tight; great value
Bowers & Wilkins	DB1	£3,250	S	1,000W	17-45	12in x 2	460 x 490 x 410	44	197	5	Bipolar arrangement, ripping
Paradigm	Seismic 110	£1,250	S	850W	18-150	10in	298 x 343 x 320	17	188	5	AKA The Bulldog and has real bite
Paradigm	SE Sub 10	£650	S	300W	24-150	10in	279 x 291 x 279	6	186	4	Compact but decent performer
Paradigm	SUB1	£5,000	S	1,700W	35-150	8in x 6	505 x 516 x 455	50	197	4	Unorthodox hexagonal shape
Polk Audio	microPro 2000	£1,200	S	1,200W	22-200	8in	280 x 321 x 324	15	186	5	Easy to use, versatile, mega sound
REL	T3	£430	S	150W	30-120	8in	300 x 343 x 356	13	186	5	Amazing sound for compact size
SV Sound	PC 12 Plus DSP	£1,250	P	800W	10-150	12.5in	1,022 x 407	39	198	4	Cylindrical sub for big spaces
Velodyne	CHT-15Q	£1,200	P	750W	23-120	15in	467 x 533 x 527	34	189	5	Great handset and EQ set-up
Velodyne	DD18+	£5,800	S	1,250W	8.8-300	18in	530 x 580 x 650	65	197	5	Huge 18in driver, muscular sound

Soundbars



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Power	Separate sub	Sub power	HDMI in	HDMI out	Dolby True HD	DTS HD MA	Dimensions/ (w x h x d)mm	Weight/kg	Issue	Rating	Comment
Monitor Audio	Radius One HD	£450	350W	-	N/A	0	0	-	-	1010 x 125 x 105	8	182	4	LCR enclosure – needs AVR
Orbitsound	T1200	£300	80W	+	20W	0	0	-	-	605 x 100 x 110	8	186	4	Offers integrated iPod dock
Samsung	HWC450	£250	160W	+	120W	0	0	-	-	957 x 92 x 46	2.3	182	4	Affordable, has wireless sub
Teufel	Cinebar 50	£670	200W	+	150W	0	0	-	-	1010 x 130 x 100	12	182	4	Punchy sound but not cheap
Yamaha	YSP-5100	£1,350	80W	+	80W	4	1	+	+	1200 x 212 x 90	11	182	5	Hi-res audio, clever processing
Yamaha	YSP-2200	£800	132W	+	100W	3	1	+	+	435 x 137 x 350	6	196	4	Effective surround sound

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LIGHTING

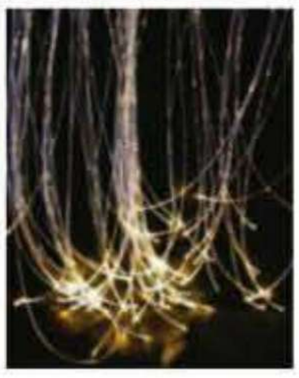
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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson looks at the whys and wherefores of Smart TV and asks whether TV makers and service providers are trying to sell us a pup?

Smart TV will be the most fundamentally important thing to happen in your living room since the advent of colour broadcasting. Perhaps even since the invention of TV itself. The promise is truly integrated, linear and on-demand entertainment, seamlessly meshed with social networking, interactive content and a million Apps that haven't even been thought of yet. A beautiful front-end interface that will effortlessly combine the best of TV entertainment and the best of connected functionality in one screen with one remote control.

Smart TV promises to transform living room behaviour, alter the way people perceive screen-based entertainment and fundamentally change our relationship with the humble telly screen. Television manufacturers will become platform operators, while broadcasters will evolve into content aggregating portals and internet service providers will act as multichannel enablers. These three key parts will come together to make Smart TV a truly immersive, fully interactive revolution right in front of your sofa.

Well, that's the theory. While most new bigscreen TVs have a network port and maybe some sort of GUI, true Smart TV is a long way from being a reality. Despite what hardware makers and service providers might like to promote, **the UK Smart TV roadmap is beset with potholes, diversions and contra-flows**. In fact, the UK – the birthplace of TV itself – may be the very last country in the western world to fully realise the Smart TV dream.

I see three huge obstacles standing in the way of ubiquitous Smart TV; non-interoperable platforms, monetisation of content and, for the UK in particular, broadband speed.

In terms of platforms, the market could not be any more fragmented or insular. Sony, Samsung, LG, Virgin, BT, Toshiba et al. all run completely different Smart TV platforms and no two are interoperable. YouView may help a bit, but the dozen mainstream TV brands and even more set-top box makers vying for a slice of the market, causes a blistering headache for service, content and application software creators. How many mainstream operating systems can any market stand? Smart TV currently has around 20 and growing. Oh dear.

Will it pay?

And how will service providers actually make any money out of Smart TV? Most consumers regard content supplied over the internet as free – even if 'free' means illegal downloading or file sharing of copyright material. In a world of seamless IT and CE convergence all content, be it supplied by the BBC or YouTube, will be distributed and redistributed, shared and reshared, time and time again. What chance is there for genuine high-value TV content when no-one wants to pay for it?

Then there is the UK's nemesis – broadband. Streamed HD TV requires a solid 4Mbps, 3D nearer 6Mbps. The average speed in the UK is still under 4Mbps and way below that outside of major conurbations or at peak usage times. We may benefit from the cheapest broadband in Europe, but the market is a mess of multiple service providers, none of whom have enough cash to genuinely upgrade the UK's core broadband infrastructure.

The government has decreed that 90 per cent of the UK will have 24Mbps broadband or better by 2015 and that almost certainly isn't going to happen. Mobile 4G networks may provide a solution to the last mile of broadband connectivity but if 10 million viewers tune into the *X-factor* in HD over an IP connection then the UK's entire data infrastructure will simply fall over. And that makes my British stiff upper lip go all a-quiver

Does the prospect of Smart TV make you smart or jump for joy? Let us know by e-mailing hcc@futurenet.com



Richard Stevenson
Any resemblance between our AV commentator and a redheaded ex-*News of The World* Editor is very curious

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